



**Jerry Faulring**

# Fall Digging for Spring Shipping A Customer Service

It has long been a tradition of field production growers to dig material ordered for spring in the fall. The root balls are 'healed in' with an appropriate material and held until it's time to ship them the next spring.

This strategy has been implemented for a variety of reasons. Probably most importantly, it facilitates harvest during ideal conditions in the fall, avoiding harsh conditions we increasingly experience in the spring. Soils are generally moist and fields are firm. Fall is also a period of limited need for field maintenance and therefore keeps staff very productive while continuing to dig for current orders. Shutting down operations too early can reduce costs but works against ideal customer relations for their fall needs.

There are negative aspects for fall digging in advance. There are additional labor costs that might better be deferred to the next year. Additional costs include baskets,

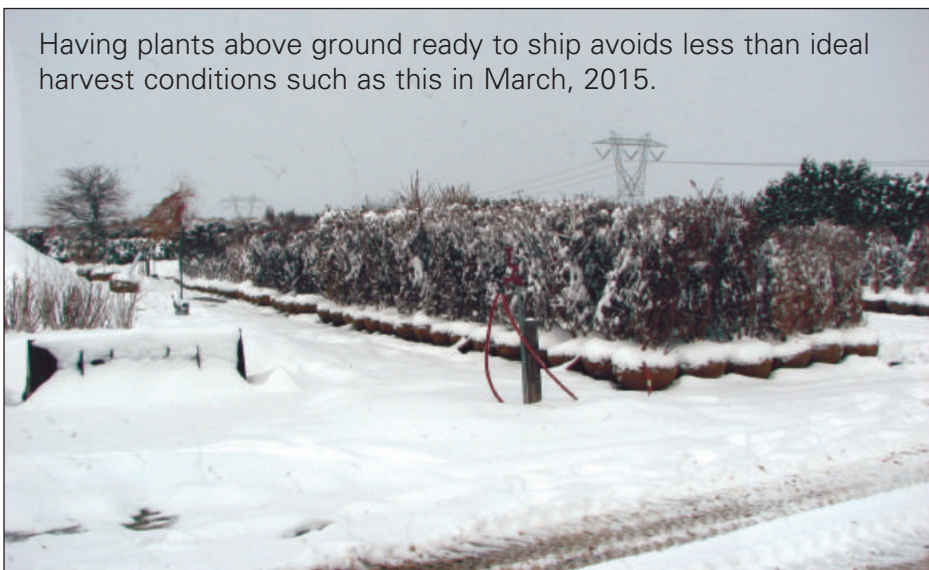
burlap, sisal, fuel and material for healing in the root balls. During profitable years, these costs will help defer taxes into the future.

The list of plants we feel can be safely dug in the fall has limitations for our plant list. Although I do not have any idea when a fall digging hazard plant is no longer a fall hazard, we do not dig anything considered a fall hazard. From experience we know certain plants that are not fall hazards will not be happy if dug; for example, Hibiscus will not flush in a timely fashion the following year; don't know why. We do not dig any conifers or evergreen plants such as Ilex and Buxus.

Some growers stopped fall harvest during the nearly decade long economic disaster to reduce costs, justifiably. Coupled with reduced demand for spring sales this was likely an excellent cost reduction plan.

However, the last three spring seasons of 2013 through 2015 proved to be very difficult spring harvest periods

Having plants above ground ready to ship avoids less than ideal harvest conditions such as this in March, 2015.



A miserable March, 2015 – did you forget?



Material dug in the fall waiting to be "healed-in".



Removing plants from winter holding.



## We have traditionally been aggressive with fall digging as a hedge against trying to make the organized chaos of spring a bit less chaotic.

due to unusual weather conditions. In 2013 some growers could not access their fields because of extremely wet conditions and in 2015 harvest was delayed due to frozen soils. I am told that some growers could not finish their deciduous orders in 2013 before it was too late to dig.

We have traditionally been aggressive with fall digging as a hedge against trying to make the organized chaos of spring a bit less chaotic. This past spring we had 20% of the total shipped material through May 30 dug before we started operations. I, along with our customers see this as a value added service. Our largest customer segment are wholesale distribution facilities. Their primary concern in spring is to receive high volumes of material before their spring selling period gets under way. They have to spread out incoming material in an orderly way to accommodate staff availability that is both receiving and shipping. We 'heal in' root balls with



what is commonly referred to as whole tree chips. The chip size ranges from fine to about silver dollar size. Each year we mix new chips with old at a ratio of 1:1. After a year in our yard, the old chips compost too far and will not be suitable due to excessive water retention and burlap staining. The primary function of 'healing in' is to prevent freeze thaw cycles for the root balls and to maintain high moisture levels; we never irrigate the plants after they are put to bed. It is rare when we see any frost in the root balls; light frost has occurred after the last two severe winters. I am not aware of any loss of vigor for these plants.

We set our start date for returning H2A VISA workers at about February 15. Although our fields drain well and rarely stop us due to saturated soils, in 2015 we could not dig until about March 1 due to frozen ground. With an abundance of fall dug material above ground our customers were very pleased to start receiving loads in late February and early March. And, for sure, early shipping gets our cash flow under way in a very timely fashion. 🍀

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