



by Lee Stivers  
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## When Plants Back Up in the Retail Greenhouse

*"Timing product supply and quality with peak customer demand is often a challenge for greenhouse operators. What happens when poor weather keeps customers at home, and retail greenhouses get crowded?"*

Inclement spring weather can delay retail plant sales, as customers wait for warmer, sunnier days to begin gardening. As space in the greenhouse gets scarce, and plants keep growing bigger, think carefully about where and how you are displaying your products.

Plants get stacked vertically. When every inch of bench space is filled with plants, flats of smaller plants often get moved to the floor under the bench (*photo, right*). Baskets are hung on two and even three levels above the benches. Light quality and quantity diminish (see e-Gro Alert 5:21, March 2016). If low light conditions remain for many days, plants will tend to stretch, especially those on the floor.

Plants get crowded horizontally. Not only is there no extra elbow room on the bench, but plants are growing every day they wait to be sold. This horizontal crowding creates excellent conditions for foliar diseases and also for stretching. As neighboring plants grow intertwined, it is easier for customers to damage them when pulling their selections off the bench.

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*When retail greenhouse space gets scarce, plants literally get stacked up.*

## e-GRO Alert

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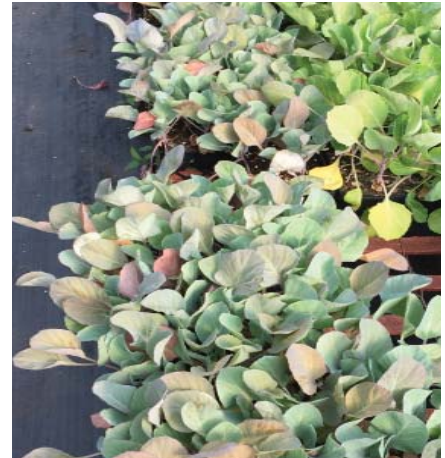
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*Placing flats under benches (left) is one way to deal with crowding in the greenhouse, but low light conditions will trigger plants to stretch, lowering quality. Signs of nutrient deficiencies (right) can often be found in overcrowded, overgrown transplants.*

Plants outgrow their rooting space. Many annuals, particularly vegetable transplants, are grown in relatively small containers or cells. If they remain in the cells too long, they may wilt frequently, and also start to show nutrient deficiencies (*above, right*). This lowers their visual appeal, and can hinder sales.

Retail spaces become visually confusing. Customers entering a retail greenhouse bursting with plants can be overwhelmed and confused by the jungle (*below*). With so many choices, it can be difficult for customers to find what



*Vigorous growth and crowded conditions can make a display bench look like a jungle. This may make it harder for customers to find what they are looking for, and can increase plant damage as shoppers separate plants for purchase.*





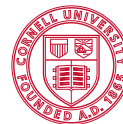
The greenhouse operation on the left creates extra display space by lining the pathway between two houses with benches. If cold weather is forecast, plants can easily be covered. The manager of the greenhouse on the right maintains clean sight lines and streamlined displays even when the greenhouse is very full, for a pleasant shopping experience.

they are looking for, to move freely along the aisles, or to differentiate between similar products.

What can be done? I went looking to find how local growers were managing tight greenhouse space. One retail greenhouse takes advantage of the microclimate created by parallel houses to expand their display area (*above, left*). This operation carries a large number of heirloom tomato varieties, and the long, wide walkway makes it easy for shoppers to browse. Another (*right*) maintains clean, straight lines of product on the retail bench to combat the jungle look. They use exceptional signage to make it easier to identify and differentiate floral products even if crowded together. Shade-tolerant ferns occupy the floor space. Another good practice is ruthless culling of poor quality product to open up space. Managing a crowded greenhouse isn't easy, but considering how and where plants are displayed can help you move them out the door looking their best.

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