

THE FARMER'S PLIGHT: A LOOK AT THE IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON CANADIAN FARMERS

Kuyvenhoven Greenhouses – Growing Food for the Soul

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Andy Kuyvenhoven and his wife have been running Kuyvenhoven Greenhouses since 1990. The operation covers 140,000 square feet, which puts them in the small to medium range of the industry.

The Kuyvenhoven's grow flowers, which Andy always calls "Food for the soul".

This year, the souls must be starving.

While COVID-19 has had devastating impacts across the agriculture sector, flower growers were hit particularly hard due to the timing of the pandemic. When customers surged to the grocery stores to buy food in preparation for the virus, most major grocery chains took flower distribution out of their systems to enhance their food distribution systems.

"We completely understand and agree with that," says Andy. "Our challenge is that our products aren't in the system to be sold, and people weren't interested in buying because they were buying life's essentials."

The floral and horticulture industry is very time-sensitive when it comes to sales. If you can't sell your product in a short time-frame, it goes bad and you are forced to compost. The lockdowns related to COVID-19 happened at one of the worst possible times, the Easter season.

For the Kuyvenhoven's, Easter represents 20% of their yearly sales. "We were very fortunate and managed to sell 50% of what we produced for Easter. But that still means I had to throw out 50% of our product. Since Easter is so important, that means I threw out 10% of our yearly income," says Andy.

Garden centres typically begin to open up in early Spring, but right now that is a decision left up to provinces and states. Likely, all of that business will also be missed due to the pandemic.

Andy is not alone in his struggle in the horticulture sector. The sector itself has lost over 60% of its predicted sales for Easter and early Spring, a massive blow to their revenue streams.

Now, Andy has his sights set on Mother's day, the next big event for flowers. Forever an optimist, he hopes that the situation will be different by then.

"At this point, we're just plowing through and we'll tell you what happens the week after Mother's Day. From the 15th of May to the 25th of June is a massive selling period with all the bedding plants, patio plants and hanging baskets, all of those things sell in that period," says Andy.

Overall, the sector does about 65% of its total sales in that time period. If things aren't different by then, Andy knows he will begin to run into liquidity issues. They still have employee and bills to pay.



Andy Kuyvenhoven holding a Mother's Day Bouquet
Potted Mum in his greenhouse.

Without the regular influx of revenue, the Kuyvenhoven's will have to make some difficult decisions on how to manage their business for the rest of the year.

Adding onto these problems, the Kuyvenhoven's are having problems with labour. Their workforce is all local, but some workers feel it is too much of a risk to come into work. So far, Andy has had to grant two employees with leaves of absence due to concerns with COVID-19.

While generally it is fairly easy to maintain social distancing on their farms, a few functions make it almost impossible, including working on a production line that has limited space.

Unfortunately, the rules remain unclear on what Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) is effective to reduce exposure other than medical grade equipment, and PPE has become extremely difficult to obtain in any form due to massive demand from the public and health sectors.

"We've been getting more clarity on what works, but we do come across things that say unless you're in full PPE your risk of exposure is high. At this point, our tactic is to make our staff extremely cognizant and to take every measure to reduce their risk, both at work and outside of work. If they feel the least bit sick, we want them to stay at home," says Andy.

Right now, the entire horticulture sector has their eyes set on Mother's Day. Without that revenue source, most horticulture farmers will be facing the same type of liquidity issues as Andy, and will struggle to pay their bills and survive to the next season.