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AGRICULTURE

Hurricanes damaged poinsettia crops in S. Fla.

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It won't be such a merry Christmas this year for poinsettia florists and growers.

An unusually active storm season has damaged half of the poinsettia crop produced in South Florida, according to an industry expert. The loss has ricocheted through the business, from nurseries to florists and even, to a small extent, to consumers.

It's a hit to a \$12 to \$15 million industry, according to Jim Barrett, a professor of horticulture at University of Florida, who studies poinsettia production. Florida is one of the nation's top producers of poinsettias, supplying about 5 million plants.

To understand what happened, start with Patrick Rosacker, owner of Boynton Beach-based Floral Acres wholesale nursery.

In October, his poinsettias were starting to turn color, and everything was going on schedule. Then came Wilma.

Wilma destroyed 50,000 of his nursery's poinsettias and caused \$600,000 in losses, he said. Another \$700,000 in damage was done to other varieties of flowering plants -- and that doesn't even count the structural damage to the shade houses for the poinsettias.

"This year was nearly a total loss," said Rosacker. "We had to go to growers outside the state who still had poinsettia."

He said he was able to fill many of his South Florida customers' orders with some 30,000 poinsettias that Virginia and South Carolina growers will ship him.

"We get truckloads that are coming from a pretty good distance to cover for our day's orders," he said.

This is not the first time hurricanes have damaged Rosacker's poinsettia crops. Last year's Hurricanes Frances and Jeanne also caused damage to Patrick Rosacker's Boynton Beach-based Floral Acres wholesale nursery, but the damage was not as severe.

Many producers have insurance, Barrett said. But they still lose because they have to pay the costs to get replacements, they have to fix facilities and the cost of their insurance rises.

The damage rippled from growers to florists.

Janice Tate, owner of Hirni's Wayside Garden in South Miami, said the storm's damage cut the supply of the growers' crops in South Dade and Palm Beach to her shop. Instead of just picking up the plants down the street in Homestead, she now has to pay as much as \$600 per trip in ground shipping fees to fetch the Christmas staple.

Her travels now take her as far north as Tampa. She has to rent trucks and pay drivers for the extra time.

"It's added a significant amount of cost," Tate said. "You pre-book by September, and we thought we had it all figured out."

She said she's going to raise prices by 5 percent -- which means \$30 from last year's \$25 for an 8-inch pot. She said the price increase will hurt local churches and decorators the most.

"We're not going up outrageously, but [prices] will be higher than they were last year," she said.

She's also cutting out discounts. She usually gives customers who make bulk orders -- say, 20 poinsettias -- a break, but not this time.

The damage will trickle down to customers, but it won't be as severe, Barrett said. Prices of poinsettias are relatively stable for consumers because many growers went out of state -- as far as New York and Canada - - to keep up supply.

However, supply will still be limited enough that consumers may not see the discounts they would usually. Normally, discounts start after Thanksgiving, Barrett said, but that has yet to happen because of short supply.

The university is studying techniques to grow poinsettias that will better be able to withstand hurricane-force winds, Barrett said. Poinsettias are the top-selling potted flowering plant in the United States, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.