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Greenhouses likely to up prices

Area growers hit by high fuel costs

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With natural gas prices for Bench's Greenhouse roughly three times higher this winter than just four years ago, the rural Elmore business delayed planting annuals and other traditional summer offerings for a couple of weeks to conserve energy.

Gardeners shouldn't notice a difference in the flowers in the next few weeks, but prices will be 5 percent higher on some items that didn't get increases last year, said owner Donald Bench, Sr.

"We didn't open some greenhouses until we had to open them," he said. "We're trying to save as much as we can."

Prices for annuals, perennials, and vegetable plants are expected to be higher this year to help growers compensate for increased operating costs, including for items such as petroleum-based plastic containers, local growers said.

Some said flowers may not be in full bloom by mid-May as is customary.

Consumers may pay as much as \$1 more for a flat of annuals that cost \$11 to \$12 last year, said Mark Hecklinger, owner of Hecklinger Greenhouse Inc. in East Toledo.

The wholesaler, who has more than seven acres of greenhouses, said he also made moves such as delaying planting times but still will have to increase prices.

He said he won't be able to determine the price boosts until he gets this month's heating bill, but some other growers are planning on increases of 7 percent to 8 percent. "There's really nothing else we can do different," Mr. Hecklinger said.

Technology improvements in recent years have helped growers, who now start sowing seeds in January instead of December, saving on fuel costs, said Larry Schmidt, an owner of Schmidt Bros. Inc., a Swanton wholesaler with 11 acres of greenhouse space. It also is raising prices.

Diane Hoefkens, partner at Obie's Flowers in Pemberville, said competition from so-called big-box retail chains will suppress increases at her store and elsewhere, eating into profits.

"Prices will go up slightly, but not as much as [growers] would like to see," Ms. Hoefkens said.

Obie's tightened plastic around its 8,000 square feet of greenhouse space to improve heating efficiency and rebuilt one of the structures, Ms. Hoefkens said. It also delayed planting until recently, so annuals may not be in full bloom by Mother's Day as they have been in previous years, she said.

Growers with their own stores or who sell to independent retailers have the best chances of increasing prices, but those who deal with chains may have a hard time getting more money, said John Holmes, executive director of OFA, a national floriculture association in Columbus.

"There's only so much that you can pass on," he said.

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