

## It's bare bum garden season — get ready for the impatiens invasion

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ST. CATHARINES—Peter Vander Hoeven is gazing over an expanse of greenhouse impatiens so varied and brightly coloured they look like the side of a giant Rubik's Cube.

"We're running them a little dry," he says, "because impatiens have a tendency to bolt."

Too much water would translate into too much growth, taking them well beyond their ideal selling height of less than 5 centimetres. The other delicate piece of timing: They have to be in bloom, since Ontarians generally won't buy plants whose flowers they have to anticipate, rather than see and touch as of, well, right now.

By early June, Vander Hoeven Greenhouses Ltd. will have shipped almost 15,000 flats of impatiens — or 720,000 plants — to retail nurseries around the GTA, Barrie and Kitchener-Waterloo. And since Vander Hoeven is just a mid-sized player among the more than 50 suppliers along the Niagara peninsula, the invading army of impatiens plants could easily run into the millions.

Is this a good thing?

If your horticultural tastes run toward the haughty, then chances are you take a dim view of impatiens, grown in this part of the world as an all-too-common annual, its genus — *Impatiens* — doubling as both singular and plural in everyday parlance.

They are not the sort of thing you'd plant if your true love were, say, Old Garden Roses, those pedigreed aristocrats in cultivation before 1867.

Plant impatiens and you'll be the one looking at your feet when fellow rose-fanciers come for a visit and spy them, a garden plant for non-gardeners. And don't even try mounting the "deep shade" defence of your choice, since you'd just be revealing a lack of imagination and/or enthusiasm, never a good thing among any kind of cognoscenti. Impatiens kind of advertises the fact that you've taken the easy way out.



Glenn Lowson/For the Toronto Star

Twin brothers Andy (left) and Peter Vander Hoeven are growing 15,000 flats of impatiens in 12 different colours in their St. Catharines greenhouses. The plants will soon make their way into GTA flower beds. (Photo taken May 12, 2011)

Which, of course, explains why they're so popular with everyone else. Once settled in, impatiens is just about impossible to kill, and while earlier renditions were mostly noted for their love of shade and bad soil, new varieties such as New Guinea now tolerate a lot of sun and grow much larger.

Nor are today's impatiens the simple red, white or coral affairs of yesteryear. Chicago-based Ball Horticultural Co., which supplies seeds to the likes of Vander Hoeven, carries more than 300 varieties in just about any colour, many of them "doubles," with two rows of petals. To wit: Double Impatiens Fiesta Ole Purple Stripe.

They're also as cheap as they are cheerful, with a pack of four typically selling for under \$2, and a full flat of 48 plants for under \$20, which is about what you'd pay for a single high-end perennial.

"It's hard to beat impatiens," says Frans Peters, co-owner of Humber Nurseries, noting they're easily the top seller among bedding plants. "They're pretty well bullet-proof. It might be boring, but you get results."

About 25 per cent of all the plants grown by Vander Hoeven are impatiens, which germinate and grow relatively quickly. The first crops to hit retail nurseries were likely sewn in March, versus January for begonias.

But here's the thing about impatiens: As easy as they are to propagate, and as indestructible as they are as adults, impatiens has a pretty fragile childhood.

While perennials, hardy annuals like petunia and alyssum, or cool-weather vegetables like lettuce and peas, can all be planted long before the Victoria Day weekend, that traditional start date still holds for impatiens.

It has to do with soil temperatures. Stick impatiens into cool, damp soil and the plant will pout, at best, or begin to rot. "They'll go into shock and it takes them a little bit to come out," says Vander Hoeven, who runs the greenhouse with his twin brother Andy.

What you're looking for is a soil temperature around 18 degrees Celsius and if you don't have a thermometer to hand, there's always the less conventional way, which mostly involves sitting on the ground bare-bottomed and gauging your (physical) comfort. If you still feel warm, then your plants will, too.

And since impatiens is, at this time of year, no match for even a light frost, nurseries without their own protective greenhouses will often delay delivery until overnight temperatures are as high as 8 degrees rather than risk taking in, say, a truckload with \$8,000 worth of plants. "They could lose that overnight," says Andy Vander Hoeven.

Being surrounded by so many impatiens plants, do the Vander Hoevens actually like them? On this, one of gardening's great metaphysical questions, Peter playfully reaches back to an anecdote about his father, Cornelis, who grew mostly vegetables before his sons took over.

Whenever a customer asked if his tomatoes tasted good, Vander Hoeven père always winkingly replied: "They're not for tasting. They're for selling."