

GROWERTALKS

Columns

1/1/2015

Growers Talk Production: All Hail the Maintenance Man!

Chris Fifo



Beryl Paul Fleenor, Swift Greenhouses' beloved maintenance man who passed away this past September.

Being a homeowner, it can often be challenging keeping on top of the maintenance. My house isn't that old (my age!), but there's rarely something that doesn't need to be fixed or updated. When kids are added to the equation, things can get downright interesting, such as tripping over the dog and putting a hole in the wall (I still question that one).

"It's only expensive if you can't do it yourself." I heard that recently when repairing my washing machine. Though not always true, it's certainly less expensive than calling a professional. In the greenhouse, the maintenance man usually doesn't have that option. He has to be a professional at everything.

Plumber: Simple enough it seems; however, we use surface water in our operation and many things must happen before the water makes it into our storage tanks. Some of these processes would be foreign to most people, but the maintenance man needs to understand them all.

First, there's just getting the water from the pond and through several types of filters in sufficient volume to keep the growers happy. Then there's an acid injector to neutralize the alkalinity (explain that to a non-plant person!). Finally, we have a homemade copper ionization system, which needs to be cleaned regularly to keep our copper at 1 ppm.

Removing the copper bars for cleaning was always time consuming. Our "Man" devised a quick and easy method for cleaning. Using a sump pump and hose fittings on either side of the copper system, we circulate vinegar through the copper tubes weekly, keeping the bars shiny and clean. Ingenious!

Electrician: Not only should the maintenance man be a certified electrician, in a greenhouse he needs to be able to recognize those areas where electricity and water may not get along well. One of the first things our Man did was go through the entire greenhouse and fix or update all outlets, junction boxes and other "irregularities" he found that could have been safety issues.

The other major project our Man accomplished was installing an entirely new electrical service. Being our power company's best customer, we were in danger of overloading our transformer (and electrical room) when we installed additional lighting in our plug range.

The power company installed a new transformer on the other side of the greenhouse and we had the power cables brought into the greenhouse. Our Man did the rest. It was amazing watching new power panels being filled with breakers and hundreds of feet of conduit fanning out throughout the greenhouse. The best part is that every breaker, circuit, outlet and junction is clearly labeled.

HVAC Specialist: In Iowa, we can get down below zero in the winter, so efficiency and reliability in our heating systems and backups are critical. Our Man sees that the LP furnaces are cleaned and properly tuned, boilers are pumping freely and alarm systems are reliable.

In the summer, he doesn't just handle ventilation, he manages airflow to achieve the most effective cooling. This past summer, our Man even retrofitted our propagation house and installed cool cells. I didn't think there was any way to work around the existing infrastructure, but he did it and made it work well.

Engineer: I can't begin to describe all the things our Man has engineered, but one of the most remarkable is a system to melt the snow from our gutters. Using an on-demand water heater and 1-in. tubing laying in the gutters, we pump a hot antifreeze solution through the tubing to keep the snow load down. No more shoveling the roof!

Mechanic: Let's not forget that the maintenance man has to keep the delivery trucks running reliably so the customers get their product on time and our drivers are safe.

Teacher: There's no way one person can do it all. Our Man has done a great job teaching his assistants how to do his jobs and training them to think through problems.

With so many major systems used in the greenhouse, it takes a special kind of person and personality to handle maintenance on a daily and seasonal basis. Our Man was all this and more.

Our maintenance man, Buryl Paul Fleenor, passed away suddenly and unexpectedly on September 28, 2014. Though we miss him dearly in our greenhouse and in our hearts, it doesn't compare to how his daughter misses her Dad and her maintenance man.

So from all your "Girly Growers" at Swift Greenhouses, Buryl, thank you for everything ... especially the set of pink tools! **GT**

Chris Fifo is Technical Services Advisor for Swift Greenhouses, Inc. in Gilman, Iowa.