

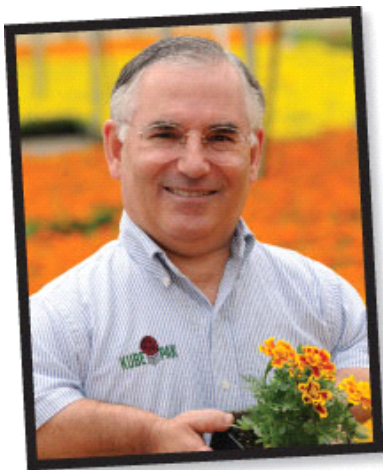
GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Business

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The Spring That Never Was

Bill Swanekamp



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For each July issue's article, I like to give a short recap of how the spring season went. Every year has its own ups and downs and this one was no exception. The odd part about this spring was that it never seemed to get going. In the Northeast, we experienced weeks of cool, wet weather with very little sun. We had rain and clouds six days a week. As a result, it seemed that spring was never going to arrive. It was common for night temperatures to dip into the low 40s all the way into the first week of June. It was as if we'd hit the low end of middle ground; no nice 80 to 85F temps with sunny days.

The result was that customers delayed buying their plants in anticipation of the weather warming up. Sadly, that warmth didn't occur until the weekend of June 10 when it hit 90+F. Now you know what homeowners

do when the temperature goes over 90F—they stop gardening. Getting that process going again can be difficult.

But let's talk about what a large or small grower does when those beautiful 10- and 12-in. hanging baskets are ready for the first and second weeks of May and sales are slow. We can use a growth regulator drench to slow them down, but eventually, they'll grow out of the GR.

What do you do when this happens? Give up and throw them away!

No, that's usually not a profitable solution. In the past, we purchased dozens of scissors and sent an army of employees into the greenhouse to trim each hanging basket. The only problem with this solution is that it's very slow. In many cases, the employees approach trimming a hanging basket as if they were cutting someone's precious hair. Slowly and meticulously, they would snip off one dead flower at a time and then one elongated stem at a time. About half an hour later, they'd completed one basket. That sounds expensive, doesn't it? Yes, it is ... and unprofitable.



We needed to solve this problem, and after some deep thought at night, came up with an interesting solution. Why not build a simple machine that could trim an 8-, 10-, 12- or even 14-in. hanging basket quickly and attractively? It had to be easy to build and cheap. (I'm all about cheap; just ask my wife.) It also had to be easy to operate so that almost any employee could use it with some basic instruction and safety training. Our goal was to trim a hanging basket in less than 10 seconds or six per minute or 360 per hour or 2,880 per day.

Pictured: Kube-Pak's homemade hanging basket trimmer.

All excited, I went to the guys in our shop and told them what I wanted and the basic design parameters. A few key points that were essential were:

1. The trimmer had to be portable so that it could be moved from bay to bay in the greenhouse.
2. It had to be adjustable on three planes: X, Y and Z. By incorporating this kind of adjustability in the trimmer, it allowed the machine to trim virtually any size basket and leave a desired look afterwards.

The next day, the maintenance guys had the first prototype. (See photo.)

Our first trial run went very well, and we were so pleased with the results that we built a second machine within a few weeks. (To see the trimmer in operation, go to <http://tinyurl.com/kubepakHBtrimmer>.)

Now you might be asking, "How much did this contraption cost?" Let me give you the basic materials and costs:

Used cart base: \$100.00

Electric hedge trimmer (Black & Decker—HH2455): \$100.00

Baldor DC motor with 8:1 reduction gearbox Model GP7413: \$450.00

Labor: \$300.00

Total: \$950.00

Because the machine can trim the baskets so quickly, it takes a crew of about eight people to run it continuously, at a cost of about 25 cents per hanging basket. This is a very reasonable cost considering what it cost us in the past to trim a hanging basket by hand. Hopefully, this will give you some ideas about how to trim your hanging baskets when they get a little overgrown. **GT**

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