

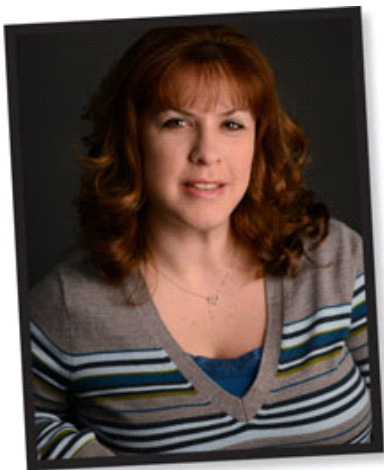
GROWERTALKS

Inside Look

2/1/2018

Solving Problems Like MacGyver

Jennifer Zurko



JENNIFER ZURKO

During our travels to greenhouses and garden centers, one thing we see a lot is how growers and retailers get creative with finding solutions to problems. Almost like “Greenhouse MacGyvers,” they can take a regular item laying around the workshop and turn it into something to help make their employees’ jobs easier.

Like building a hanging basket trimmer from a hedge trimmer and a reduction gear motor to take care of the baskets that have become overgrown, for instance. Heck, Beytes used wheels from a skateboard to make a tripod slider for our video camera, but then again, he’s kinda like the “GrowerTalks MacGyver.”

However, there are some problems that can’t be solved using forgotten junk. Finding a way to save on energy costs is a tough one to tackle. Besides

ensuring your greenhouse is air-tight and being miserly about when you turn the heat up, there isn’t much else to do. Even MacGyver couldn’t get oil or natural gas from a rubber band and a paper clip.

About 10 years ago, “alternative fuel” was the buzzword, as the economy crashed and fuel prices went through the roof, so some growers took the chance of investing in biomass boilers. It was a complicated risk—not only did they have to spend quite a bit of capital to purchase a special boiler, but they had to ensure it was connected to all of their greenhouses and find sources for the wood, along with making space to put all of it. Those who did the research and calculations knew it would be a huge undertaking.

But after seeing how much they would be saving on fuel, they had to take the risk. And 10 years later, it’s proven to be very much worth it. I reached out to a couple of growers who installed biomass boilers a decade or so ago and asked them for an update. Are they still happy with their biomass heating system?

Since this issue focuses on growing media, irrigation and fertilizer, we have other sources of information beyond the big world of biomass. Dr. Brian Jackson, the consummate substrate sultan from NC State University, and his colleagues have come up with an ingenious way to really look inside growing media to see how the substrates they are made of are actually working. Think of it like giving your pots a CAT scan!

Kurt Becker from Dramm knows A LOT about moisture management, so we asked him to give us some tips on how to improve upon your irrigation system to make sure that it’s at peak performance just in time for spring production.

And to cover the nutrition side of things, Allison Westbrook asked a couple of natural fertilizer experts how you can use organic/natural fertilizers together with traditional ones. Kinda like an IPM program, but for fertilizer.

You've probably heard about silicon and how it can be a real benefit for growing plants, but do you really know what it does and how you can adjust your nutrition program to incorporate it in your production plan?

As the height of growing season is underway, my hope is that any problems that arise in your greenhouse are few and easy to solve—even if you have to put on your MacGyver hat to figure it out. **GT**