

GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Production

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Building for the Future

Roger McGaughey

(Editor's note: This month, we're revisiting one of Roger's favorite columns from the past. This one was originally published in GrowerTalks in March 2013.)

Growing can be a rewarding, but humbling, occupation at times. We need to have a vision of what our final crops are going to turn out like and, with that in mind, we need to plan well to achieve our goals. It's important to be task-orientated and to make sure that, in the end, our customers are happy with the products we offer.

That having been said, one part of my job is to train our personnel to grow good-quality, profitable crops. We have a great group of dedicated employees at Pioneer and we've recently hired three young college graduates to add to our wonderful "growing" world. When graduates are ready for the real world they sometimes have a problem finding a job because they don't have experience. The converse of that is that they can't get any experience because they don't have a job.

At Pioneer, we believe that as long as they're reliable, organized, detail-orientated and come with a good attitude and desire to learn, we can teach them what they need to know to perform satisfactorily in their new environment. Sometimes it's better for them not to have any preconceived ideas as to how to do things, but to learn from a set of basic principles of how things work in their specific area. We can use our in-house, experienced managers to convey the crop knowledge and necessary work standards to them.

All of our new trainees, as well as our current growing staff, are extremely keen on our biological style of growing. There's a definite trend in the industry to grow green and we want to continue along these lines. But how much do they know? What practical experience do they have? Where does the training need to start? Sometimes we "older" growers take some things for granted, but maybe they need to start right from the beginning. Graduating from college shows they have the learning capabilities, but we have to teach them the important, day-to-day aspects of large-scale crop production.

Recently, Dr. Roger Styer wrote about fungus gnats and shoreflies in the January issue of GrowerTalks. Do our young trainees know the life cycles of these insects? Do they know where they come from? (It's amazing what a potato wedge test in a new batch of mix reveals.) Have they ever seen the larvae? Have they seen the damage that can result from infestation? Some of their answers surprised me. Recognizing these problems and knowing how to deal with them is very relevant to the success or failure of a developing root system.

What biological methods are available for fungus gnat/shorefly control? Hypoaspis mites, Atheta beetles and nematodes are all BCAs that can be used to protect newly stuck cuttings. An application of the new generation of RootShield and RootShield Plus+ WP gives broader fungal protection and we're using it at the onset of the

production process. Everyone needs to know the biology of these items and how they work. We need to use all the tools that are available, learn from our own and others' experiences—good and bad—and make things work for us in our environment.

In previous jobs, I was probably spoiled because I was growing crops from purchased, well-rooted cuttings; I'd forgotten how challenging this early stage of production really is. In adverse winter conditions, even recommended pest/disease programs don't always work as predicted. It's very important to be observant, flexible and open to other courses of action. Good-quality finished crops are only produced by getting everything right from the start. Our trainees need to learn and understand this process.

We'll monitor our new and existing assistants, help them develop daily routines and good horticultural habits and, hopefully, watch them become happy, knowledgeable growers of the future. **GT**

Roger McGaughey, head grower at Pioneer Gardens in Deerfield, Massachusetts, was educated in Northern Ireland and England and has 44 years experience as a grower.