

GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Business

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Take Me to Your Weeder

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I have an enemy. It never rests, never quits, never stops coming for me. One day, many years from now, I will retire. My struggle will be over, but this villain will still be going, strong as ever.

Who is my enemy? Weeds.

They're the original gangsters: "Cursed is the ground because of you; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of your life. Thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to thee." How depressing!

But I'm not Fred Flintstone, right? I have an arsenal on my side. I have strategies. I have tactics. Suppression. Prevention. Mulches and sprays. Schedules and regimes. Cocktails of chemical warfare. Honestly, I delegate all of this, but not because I don't think it's important. I delegate weed control for the same reason I delegate everything else: because it IS important. If I

had a motto, perhaps it would be, "If you want something done right, have someone more competent than yourself do it."

Weeds, however, don't care about my best management practices. They're not intimidated, and in the end—despite every attempt to suppress, prevent and mitigate—someone is going to have to go out into the field and do the hard work of pulling weeds.

Weeding is not a fun job, and when canning, planting, spacing and pruning (and shipping!) all need to be done all over the nursery at the same time, it's all too easy to put weeding on the backburner. And that's the exact wrong thing to do.

Just because you've been in business 50 years doesn't mean you always get the simple things right. Last year, we tried something different. Instead of waiting for the weeds to get out of control to the point they could no longer be ignored, we took one area and instructed Macario to walk it every two weeks ... and pull what he saw. That sounds really basic, but it wasn't easy to do. It took discipline because there were plenty of times when it sure seemed like a low priority compared to (seemingly) more urgent tasks. "We have orders to pull!"

In the end, we proved what we'd always known: a few hours spent picking small weeds saves hundreds, if not thousands, of hours of pulling weeds once they've grown big enough to set seed and multiply. Frequency matters. Consistency is the MVP of BMPs.

As a child, Roadblock and Duke used to tell me on Saturday mornings, “Now you know and knowing is half the battle.” But that’s the problem—it’s only half the battle. Knowing isn’t enough. The other half is hard work. Will this year be any better? What about the next? What will I do with my childish truth: Pull weeds when they’re small?

The higher up in management you go, the more you realize that weeds aren’t only in the field. The most insidious ones might just be in the office. Bittercress and spurge might have aliases ... gossip, strife or laziness. “That’s not in my job description!” Weeds might be hiding behind cubicle walls. You may find them deeply rooted in a substrate called “policy.” Bureaucracy is the most fertile ground ever found, for good and for ill.

My enemy, it turns out, is good for something. It makes an excellent metaphor. How thankful—oh, how grateful—I should be! My literal enemy, which I will struggle against in every season on the nursery, is the clearest example possible of the truth behind all human problems. Schoolteachers, doctors and marketing executives don’t have to deal with literal weeds. Therefore, they have no instructor to forcibly teach them the simple, childish truths: You reap what you sow. For everything there is a season. Pull weeds when they’re small ... for they will surely grow!

I think perhaps I should spend less time trying to be a better leader and spend more time being a better a weeder.

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