

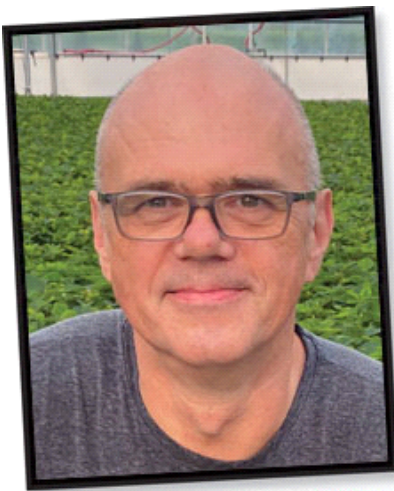
GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Production

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When Crop Disaster Strikes

Albert Grimm



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I've been privileged. Throughout my career I was able to invest in a form of education that's very hard to come by these days: I had the opportunity to lose crops and not lose my profession.

I can tell you there's no learning experience quite like watching a crop go sour. For me, every manifestation was an important investment opportunity. Yes, these crop disasters were costly. They cost my employers because someone had to pay for the damage. They also cost me because my income potential was limited in the aftermath of each of these events. Today, I consider this money not as lost, but as invested, not dissimilar to the student loans that many accumulate in the university years.

I've experienced all manner of crop failures. There were unexpected pests and diseases, and pesticides that killed the crop instead of the pest. Even sabotage was among the culprits. Some crops were lost due to my ignorance and lack of attention. Indeed, my first experience was a suitable jump-start on this path of learning by failure. No more than two months into my greenhouse career, my boss explained to me how to operate a backpack sprayer. I was eager to show my capabilities, so he sent me off to spray Gramoxone on the weeds around a field of cut tulips. The problem was that I had no idea what a tulip looked like and I felt too embarrassed to ask, so I sprayed the tulips along with the weeds.

In today's world of skin-tight production schedules and ultra-competitive business models, there's hardly any room for such errors. This creates a problem for the future of our industry. Opportunities are rare where growers can develop the stamina and skills to persist through the humiliation of failure while they watch how a crop gets composted. It's difficult to convince operators and growers that there are benefits to these important learning experiences. Perfection is an irrational expectation in our business and failures will happen. If we handle them well, we can turn them into competitive advantages.

If we've never been taught how to respond to damage and loss, our instinctive responses take over. Those of us at the center of a crop-loss scenario typically react with denial and deflection. We grasp whatever "out" we find to protect ourselves from the wrath that follows such damage. Those of us who must deal with the commercial fallout of failed crops typically dedicate too much time and attention on finding and exposing incompetent wrongdoing instead of investigating the causalities that led to the damage. Any failed crop is a mess that nobody wants to own. Yet, if there's no ownership, there's little chance that anybody will walk away with the valuable knowledge and experience that's concealed in each failure.

In the labor market, dirty-hands experience is favored over any other type of learning. It may be difficult to accept, but the experience that we're seeking is the wisdom that comes from living through failures. In our business, we repeat what works and we don't repeat what doesn't work. Generations of growers learned by this principle. If this practice wouldn't include sporadic failure, we wouldn't know what doesn't work, and therefore, we wouldn't have the opportunity to learn what we shouldn't repeat.

If there's no room for failure, there's little prospect to develop experience beyond textbook knowledge. We must learn how to fall and get up again. For growers, it takes tremendous stamina to fail repeatedly without becoming a failure. And for operators, it takes stamina to accept these crop failures as unavoidable components of progress. Such resilience is necessary stuffing in the skillset needed for greenhouse production.

If we approach a critical problem with a collective sense of acceptance, we can avoid repeating mistakes. This can be an important advantage over competitors who don't invest in these learning opportunities. If we focus merely on the loss, we might lose critical professional spirit along with money. Iron-clad defensiveness won't change results any more than throwing people under the bus. Open conversation, honest analysis and mental stamina are needed, and these require us to put effort into mutual support and understanding. **GT**

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