

GROWERTALKS

Columns

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Growing Ideas: The Dump Pile File

P. Allen Hammer



How big is your dump pile? I am sure this is a troubling question for most growers. It's impossible for a greenhouse to avoid a dump pile unless you send your dump to the landfill and don't have to look at it each day. So, the question really becomes: What is an acceptable size for a dump pile? The answer to that is probably as uncertain as the answer to what is an acceptable profit margin for a particular greenhouse. Regardless, I do think every greenhouse should carefully monitor the dump pile and use the size of it to help make growing decisions.

The first question you must ask is this: What's in your dump pile? Are you dumping saleable plants that simply don't have a buyer? Or are you dumping plants that are of poor quality? Your approach to reducing your dump pile would be very different depending on your answer to that simple question. You would need to either correct a planning/marketing problem or a production problem. In some ways, an over-production problem is much easier to correct—you simply don't grow plants that don't have a buyer. In general, we have reduced the speculation in all segments of our industry, which has reduced the size of dump piles. Price pressures have forced us to make earlier production planning decisions and more closely align production with the market. We know dumping finished products has a large effect on your bottom line because not only do you lose your production cost on the dumped plants, but also must use the profits from the plants you sold to pay for those production losses. Do the calculation of how many plants you need to grow and sell to cover the cost of each dumped finished plant. Speculation certainly will not be very appealing after such a calculation.

If your dump pile contains plants that were unsaleable because of poor quality, you need to take a serious look at when the dump occurs during the production cycle. If the dump occurs during shipping, you need to do a lot more sorting and decision-making earlier in the production cycle. Growers who group similar plants early in the production cycle have much less dump at shipping because it's much easier to manage those differences early on and make each plant saleable at finish. Keep in mind that dumping poor-quality plants at finish has the same costs as dumping excellent-quality plants, yet the fix is very different.

It's also important to monitor the dump during propagation and early plant growth. This type of dump is difficult to track unless the grower is paying close attention to production numbers. All dump should be tracked to help make production changes that reduce loss.

I don't believe every seed, cutting or plug you start in the greenhouse will result in an excellent-quality finished plant. Every greenhouse will experience some dump. Your question is: How much is acceptable? Greenhouses should remove poor plants earlier in production instead of waiting until finish to dump unacceptable plants. Why add production cost to a plant you know will not be saleable at finish?

Greenhouse operations should be very careful with the use of the dump pile. It's tempting to reuse the contents of the dump pile in production. But keep in mind that the dump pile often contains problems that can easily be re-introduced into the new production. Don't use the dump pile to compromise your next crop.

Grower Idea of the Month: What's in the Pile?

This dump pile could be located at any greenhouse operation. The idea is not to avoid a dump pile, but to simply monitor the dump pile. Every grower should know what is being dumped and for what reasons. Use the size and content of your dump pile to help you make both planning and production decisions.

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