

GROWERTALKS

Columns

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Growers Talk Production: Growing with a Plan

Rob O'Hara



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I'm beginning to believe that only with a good crop plan ahead of time can a grower successfully grow consistent, quality crops year after year. My crop plans and records used to be kept in my head, but times are changing and the stakes are higher to produce consistent quality. This is why we need to be more thorough when it comes to planning and record keeping.

This is a lesson I feel every grower has probably learned the hard way, including myself. Two years ago, I grew a crop of cyclamen for the first time. The crop was being sold as part of a combination planter at Christmas time. I neglected to make any type of plan for this crop and just sort of winged it. The crop turned out great, but I didn't really know why. If I had spent more time planning and researching cyclamen, I would've had a better understanding of what I did right or wrong with the crop.

This also would've given me a good tool to use for the following year when we decided to grow more cyclamen after such a success the first year. As tradition usually goes in this business, when you sell out you usually grow more the next year. What I needed to do was deliver another crop as equally good as the previous year in order to stay consistent.

To make a long story short, I didn't deliver the best crop and our shrink was too high. I look back now and realize that if I had made some records from the previous year I would've had a greater chance for a more successful crop. After many mistakes, I'm now making better plans for every crop and then following up with good records.

A good plan always starts with the ordering of the product. Variety selection has become one of the most important aspects of my job. Growing the right genetics to properly suit your greenhouse, customer and the end consumer is a key factor. I like to research how varieties perform within my region's (the Northwest) climate. Because I grow under low-light levels, I have to be careful about the varieties I choose.

Once the product is ordered I sit down and look at all the specific needs of each crop. This can sometimes be a very lengthy process, but I try to keep it simple. My first priority is to work each crop into our space allocation spreadsheet so I know where it's going to grow, how much space it's going to take, and what crops can grow best together. I take into consideration temperatures, watering, fertilizer, growth regulators and light levels.

Next, I make my strategies for everything I need to do to the crop, keeping in mind the culture requirements, the finish dates and the customer's specifications. This should be done proactively with your assistants when the first plug is planted. I always tell my growers to "think the crop"—to know how the crop needs to be grown and what the expectations of that crop will be. Get everyone involved in this process. That way the whole team will take ownership and keep you informed if everything's growing according to plan.

With this plan in place and the plants growing, it's much easier to keep the records during the growing period, as well as at the end of the crop. I like to make sure I include things such as good or bad varieties, timing of planting, space requirements, pest and disease problems, growth regulator effectiveness, and overall crop quality. I make sure I don't just focus on what went wrong. If something worked well I always make note of it. This will help motivate my team the following year because they'll already have a clear understanding of what can help make a crop great. My cyclamen crop would have benefited from a well-kept record of the previous year.

At the end of the day I feel the best way to deliver ongoing, consistent quality every year is to have a good planning and recording system that works for you. **GT**

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