

GROWERTALKS

Columns

7/26/2011

Growers Talk Production: The “Other” Christmas Crop—Zygo Cactus

Rob O'Hara



ROB O'HARA

For years we've been growing Zygos, but for some reason when we talk about Christmas crops, the poinsettias get all the attention. I feel that Zygos are equally as challenging in their own way as poinsettias. Here is what I can share with you about what I've learned about Zygo cactus.

We used to start all of our plants from rooted liners imported from Europe. A few years ago, we decided to buy unrooted cuttings to help bring down the input costs of the crop.

Propagating these plants is what I find to be the most challenging.

Propagation and young plant production:

- Not too hot! Zygos don't like to be as warm as a regular cutting; bottom heat isn't even necessary. If you get too hot it could lead to fusarium and erwinia infections quickly. I like to keep the root zone at 20-22C (68-71F) and air temps at 20-22C (68-71F).
- Not too wet! There is no mist needed on these and they should also be allowed to dry down to a Level 1 before watering. Make sure you have a good soil to start.
- Fungus gnats and shore fly prevention is a must. Start this early by using either bios or chemicals such as Citation.
- Thrip control. This is very important; monitor thrip levels closely and do treatments if needed. Thrips will cause the pads not to develop and delay the growth considerably.
- Fertilizer. Once rooted, apply moderate levels of feed; 100 to 150 ppm with no minors. I overlooked this once and it caused a big setback in my crop.
- Crop maintenance. Remove any infected plants and flower buds as needed. Also, if some varieties are not branching out well, an early removal of the lits is recommended for better branching.
- Light levels. Make sure you have the plants under lights for rooting as well as long days to keep them from flowering. Once the days are getting longer, make sure there is enough shade so you don't burn or

stress them out.

If all goes well, you'll have a rooted liner with three cuttings that have two new leaves on top that are ready to be transplanted. Grade the cuttings well before transplanting and only plant healthy cuttings. Grade out any that are not up to standards. When planting, make sure the transplanting crew is handling the liners carefully and not damaging any stems; rough planting can lead to open wounds for pathogens to enter the stems.

Once planted, place the Zygos into a greenhouse that has some shade or white wash on the roof. This is important because if it's too bright the leaves can get bleached. It will also help to keep the greenhouse cool during the summer months and reduce the risk of leaf dropping or shattering.

For disease management, use sprays with Phyton 27 and Heritage Maxx to help control stem rot. Aside from that, if you manage your water and fertility well you should not need to do too much spraying. As for pests, watch the thrips closely because if too high they will distort the leaves and also reduce or eliminate buds. Put up yellow cards and spray as needed with a rotation of chemicals from different groups. We've found that works well.

Flowering and finishing

Once you reach short days, your cactus will begin to initiate flower and then six to eight weeks later you'll be selling them. Reduce fertilizer levels and also dry them down. Ten days after short days you need to think about leveling. If plants are getting too tall, leveling is a good way to even out the crop. The other advantage of leveling is to get more flower buds; Zygos will produce more buds per leaf off of mature leaves. The big disadvantage of leveling is the labor cost involved; it takes a long time to level Zygos, so do this selectively by the variety.

In closing, I don't claim to be an expert on Zygos production—actually far from it—but I hope that some of my practical experience and what I've learned can help someone who is growing the “other” Christmas crop. **GT**

Rob O'Hara is the head grower for Rainbow Greenhouses in Chilliwack, British Columbia, Canada.