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ANLA: Bob’s View—Pay Now or Pay Later

Bob Dolibois

As I write this issue’s column, there are two potential challenges to our industry that could take an edge off whatever optimism is emerging for the 2012 business cycle. The challenges involve diseases that can severely retard the market attractiveness of several high-performing plants: boxwood blight on—yup, boxwood; and an uptick in downy mildew on some varieties of impatiens.

(Full disclosure: I am NOT a scientist. There are other people who are more able to add clarity to the concerns expressed in this column. I am, however, a realist surviving in a media and political bubble in which facts are commonly less influential than feelings. I have learned how stupid things can get, even if we know better.)

Both of these diseases need certain favorable environmental conditions before they become significant threats. Those conditions may or may not repeat themselves in 2012 as they existed in 2011. If there is no repeat, then this limitation is an important gift of time for our industry to get its act together before these or a different disease or pest clobber us.

Getting our act together means figuring out how this cottage industry of independent-minded people supported by a shrinking research capacity of independent-minded researchers can tackle complicated pests and diseases—while cooperating with a set of independent-minded state and federal plant protection regulators.

What is required is a respectable conductor who can lead this group of independent-minded “stakeholders” (sorry) into performing a good version of “Kumbaya” … in true harmony.

With respect to boxwood blight, ANLA and its research partner, the Horticultural Research Institute (HRI) have grabbed the baton. Based on initial organizing efforts, we appear to be getting something going. With respect to impatiens downy mildew, no doubt a collaborative effort with SAF can produce similar positive
signs, if needed.

A necessary first step is appointing an industry-based working group of plant producers. In the case of boxwood blight, that means people who have a serious stake in boxwood production in states with or without positive testing of the blight. This working group is already looking at how to manage/guide an industry response to prevent avoidable spread of the blight through best practices and, through responsible information-sharing with customers and consumers, avoid a seizing up of the market for boxwood. For ongoing updates, visit www.boxblight.org.

A second necessary step is to identify longer-term key research goals for addressing the fungus. HRI has the ability to fund some research from the proceeds of its endowment. ANLA & HRI have the proven ability to raise additional industry funding beyond the endowment from industry interests such as non-member boxwood producers, state associations and the supplier community. HRI is also exploring additional funding channels from ongoing federal and state research programs, like the USDA Floricultural and Nursery Research Initiative, IR-4 minor crop program and provisions in the latest Farm Bill.

With agreed-upon research goals, backed by the necessary funding, there’s every reason to believe that successful research will be undertaken by collaborating researchers, with reduced prospects of duplicative projects and “NIH” (not invented here) skepticism of research results.

The third chorus of voices is represented by the international, federal and state regulators with responsibilities to enact and enforce plant quarantines and conduct plant inspections. They also advise other government authorities on the potential risks of the spread of plant diseases and pests, like this blight. ANLA is working intensely with these regulators to develop a regulatory response that is “calibrated” to the realities of this disease.

So far, it appears that the U.S. Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) will not be declaring a full-measure quarantine on the movement of boxwood. There are just too many variables in play to warrant that level of reaction. Clearly, the level of responsible action demonstrated by the industry in the form of self-imposed best practices will determine future prospects of a higher caliber regulatory response.

“Hey, Dolibois! I don’t grow boxwood. Why should I care?” Good question.

You should care because if we are successful in learning how to sing “Kumbaya” with boxwood blight, we have a familiar baton ready for the next challenge. This is a good time not to be too “impatient” with a focus on others’ problems. GT

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