

GROWERTALKS

Features

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Grab Some Bench

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Think of greenhouse benches like you do when it comes to your teeth—you have to take care of them, they're sometimes a pain to maintain, but they're pretty much a necessity. Even if most of your bays consist of ebb and flood floors, many growers need benching during the propagation stage.

"A high quality and efficient benching system is essential to all greenhouse growers and must be uniquely tailored to meet the crop and workflow requirements of the business," said Leigh Coulter, President of GGS

Structures Inc., a manufacturer of greenhouse structures and benches based in Vineland Station, Ontario, Canada.

Benches also are critically important to plant quality and labor costs. Let's look at the choices:

1| Stationary benches. Typically, I see these as wood frame with some type of mesh tabletop, or steel and aluminum benches with expanded metal tops. Wood can be slightly less expensive than metal benches, although there's a cost for upkeep and they can be hard to disinfect at year-end. Stationary benches are the right choice if you have a retail house, but stationary benches don't use floor efficiency well—often with only 50% to 60% floor covering.

Pros: Gets crop up where you can more easily work. Mesh tops and expanded metal tops improve airflow and improve plant quality, allowing heat to go under the bench.

Cons: Too many aisles reduce crop efficiency.

2| Rolling benches. Usually, these are metal benches using an expanded metal mesh top. Rolling benches allow a house to reduce down to one aisle and still allow you to reach across any bench to water or load/pick your crop.

Pros: Improve crop efficiency with typically 80%+ bench coverage. Metal benches are low maintenance. Expanded metal allows good airflow and allows you to put heat under the bench.

Cons: One aisle means no retail—this is a wholesale-only configuration. You must learn new

labor techniques to stay efficient, as it can be a long walk to one plant. It's more costly to install.

3| Traveling benches. Here the benches move toward you with a bench system designed to fill a house. You move the small, often 8 ft. x 15-ft. benches, on a series of rollers and conveyors to your planting area, then move the bench to your growing area. When shipping, you pull a whole bench out of the greenhouse to pick and pack the orders. While this might be the most expensive system to install, there's real labor savings and utilization payback. Depending on the greenhouse and crop, these systems approach 95% bench utilization.

Pros: Dramatic improvement in labor efficiency and can automate them by using robots for a number of tasks. The best use of floor space.

Cons: Difficult to pick small orders. More expensive to install and requires the greenhouse to be configured to take advantage of product flow.

4| Flood benches. These benches are designed to sub-irrigate crops. I've seen all sorts of flood benches, from simple poly-lined to fiberglass troughs to more sophisticated benches with hard plastic liners. This type of bench can be stationary, rolling or a traveling-type depending on your underframe. The key here is that your watering labor is reduced, as well as crop uniformity improved, and all runoff water collected. Combining your bench system with your irrigation system does have a few extra problems to solve—including making sure your benching system can handle not only the weight of your crop, but also the added weight of the water. But the benefits of having a flood bench system should outweigh any engineering hurdles.

Pros: Highest-quality crop with uniform watering through the entire bench. Reduced labor costs and allows the water to be collected and reused.

Cons: Adding an irrigation system to a bench system is the most expensive option. Not a good retail setup (although better at retail than drip tubes).

5| Tiered bench displays. This is a retail configuration with the goal of making it easier for shoppers to see and reach your products. I find most benches are poor for consumers, as we expect a shopper to bend over and reach. Compared to how typical clothing stores are set up—where I see narrow shelves no deeper than 18 in.—a 5 ft. or 6 ft.-wide greenhouse bench is just not consumer friendly. Most tiered displays use narrow-width tops and then stack a few shelves at easy-to-reach heights. Many have a bar for hanging baskets. While you might not be able to put as many plants on a tiered display, they will sell more quickly and give the shopper a more pleasant experience.

Pros: A better visual display. Faster turns at retail.

Cons: Hold fewer plants than large, wide benches. Extra cost.

So how do you decide what is best? Can you evolve from one system to another as your business changes? Your bench decisions should be driven by where you want the business to go. Clearly, if you're a retail grower versus a wholesale grower, there are logical paths.

For the retail grower: Here, you need a bench system set up for your customers—not for production. The questions to ask will be: do you install permanent benches or do you have a concrete floor and benches that can be moved to fit the season or display? Recognize here that concrete floors are not a low-cost option, but may create a better shopping experience. As you think about benches, think about customer flow—what will be most comfortable for them and effective for you to set up displays?

For the wholesale grower: Again, based on your business plan, will your business be large enough to later install traveling benches—and if so, would you set up your product and material flow a certain way now to avoid making massive production changes later? We often see growers keep crops on the ground for a few years then leap right into a traveling bench system.

My suggestion is that you work with a manufacturer who understands your business needs and can adapt a bench system to impact your plant quality, your labor and your overall success with customers. **GT**

Laurie Scullin is the owner of a product, idea and business development company—The New Product Group. Laurie has spent the last 20 years offering marketing support to some of the industry's top firms and has developed programs in use at independent garden centers, big-box chains and supermarkets across the United States and Canada.

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