

GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Business

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Moving Forward With Lessons Learned

Gary Mangum



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As many of you reading this may know by now, we challenged our team to grow in-house production this year without neonics. This was meant to test the impact on our production quality, related in-house discards and cost. Through this, we learned or were reminded of several facts. Among them are that neonics are among the safest products on the market when used according to the label. As we know, they work systemically, reducing exposure to our workers and providing the longest and most targeted pest/plant protection. Most alternatives that may be used in place of neonics are often foliar, and in our comparative results, we did see that they are often not as effective even with multiple foliar applications.

Newer chemicals that we considered also had some negative impact on certain finished production; geraniums and verbena were a notable problem, as well as multiple pepper crops where aphids could not be safely controlled and were, therefore, destroyed. We know that poinsettias grown without neonics could potentially be a disaster in large-scale production, as we can't ship plants or product with whitefly.

We're increasingly concerned that the messaging on the subject as it relates to honey bees is a far more significant challenge than neonics actually create when they're used as labeled. There are so many scientific studies and facts that contradict the sensational negative comments that have been promoted by a very select few. Varroa mite, lack of forage and weather are all seen as primary and formidable foes to bee populations.

There's obviously a targeted PR campaign directed primarily at neonics and big box retail, but really towards pesticides in general. If these inflammatory groups are successful at limiting or removing neonics—the safest option—how long before they target other chemical classes (including fungicides and even PGRs) that could move us to longer re-entry periods, increased applications and decreased worker safety?

As we believe that neonics are among the very safest pesticides on the market for people, mammals, birds and the environment, we have to contemplate the end plan for the groups that are pushing for bans. They've

stated publicly that they not only want these chemicals out of our toolbox, but that they want all pesticides removed from store shelves—an all-organic world is what some are calling for.

Over the past year, we've tracked incoming communications on neonics and have seen predictable spikes when groups send out anti-pesticide propaganda—inquiries come in waves and frequently follow a similar script. Our overriding frustration is the more research we do, the more we realize the message being delivered isn't based on peer-reviewed or sound science. Assuming level heads agree we can't have a pesticide-free world, we need to work together to provide the other side of the story, based strictly on the science.

It's a known fact that live goods sold annually, as well as those already part of the mature landscape, account for less than 10% of actual forage utilized by honey bees. Targeting big box retail and, by extension, growers and the retail garden sales environment, is purely a political move to create a point of pressure hoping to lead to a full ban.

We're committed to ensuring appropriate and scientific research is funded, completed and shared with key audiences, including the public. AmericanHort and the Society of American Florists (SAF), along with their research partners HRI and AFE, are currently fundraising for the Bee and Pollinator Stewardship Initiative.

I'm asking everyone in our industry that can to please consider an investment in the research branches of these organizations to specifically fund scientific studies on dissipation rates, the flow of neonic pesticide to the flower (pollen and nectar) and a public relations campaign to get peer-reviewed science formatted in a way that the public will understand.

Among the initial programs coming out of the Initiative is a short video telling the reality of honey bees—where they live, how they forage, how 4,000 native species aren't at risk—and why neonics are the most popular, safest pesticide on the planet. We're working closely with AmericanHort, SAF and others on this effort and have found much to be excited about already.

We need private industry funds to move forward in a productive manner. Please invest today by going online via the Horticultural Research Institute (HRI) (www.americanhort.org) or the Society of American Florists (www.safnow.org). Regular updates will be provided to all investors and a short video will soon be available that will help educate our own employees, customers and end consumers. I'm happy to answer any questions related to the Initiative or why, based on extensive internal research over the past year, we feel it's so important to get sound science behind our industry (gary@bellnursery.com). GT

Gary Mangum is co-owner of Bell Nursery, Burtonsville, Maryland, and can be reached by email at: gary@bellnursery.com.