

GROWERTALKS

Columns

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Thinking Critically About Young Plant Inputs

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The choice between seed and plugs, or between unrooted cuttings and liners, has become routine for many growers. A grower who's been successful with his prior crop may naturally say, "Why change?"

The truth is that the decisions you make about input forms are integral to your crop's quality and profitability. As influences and circumstances impacting your business change, so, too, should your consideration of new ways of working. Being open to new approaches can improve crop outcomes and create a better bottom line.

Elements of production—including fuel costs, labor, shrink and value-added product quality—have a substantial impact on profitability. Keeping production greenhouses closed longer, reducing shrink, improving your output quality or adding a turn can translate to a better financial return. Acquiring plugs or liners rather than sowing or sticking your own may be a more profitable approach. Also, if you already buy plugs or liners from a young-plant producer, using a larger form—such as a 288 instead of a 512 or a 72-cell in lieu of a 102—could shorten production times, reduce shrink and save you money. Here are a few key things to consider:

Sow or buy? The choice between self-sowing or buying plugs is fundamental. If you sow seed, are you objectively evaluating your end result? For many operations that sow their own seed, the highest percentage of loss in any crop is shrink during the plug production stage. Capital investment per square foot of plug production space is also the highest in most greenhouse facilities. Fairly assessing not just germination rates, but "usable plants" from a plug tray, should be your guide.

Growing a plug that finishes efficiently and delivers the needed vigor and competitive quality requires excellent natural conditions, costly infrastructure or both. For many genera, light is critical to root and shoot development in the plug. Better light means more roots, better branching and larger stem caliper. This means better establishment after transplanting and faster fill in the container.

For species that flower on accumulated light, increased moles of light (mol) during the winter and early spring months can significantly reduce crop times, allowing for later planting dates and/or more greenhouse turns.

URC or RC? Similar to the choice between seed and plugs, equal consideration should be given when determining whether to stick unrooted cuttings (URCs) or buy rooted cuttings (RCs). Several factors influence the efficiency, quality and profitability of a vegetative crop, including total crop time, shrink during production and the quality of the growing conditions your facility can provide during the young-plant stages of development. An inferior-quality young plant with poor rooting and/or branching will likely cost more in the end, due to the problems it can cause during the finishing stage.

You should ask yourself: Can you do it better than highly experienced and successful young plant suppliers? Are you really saving money or producing a more dependable supply of the items you need? Buying plugs or liners in today's market, for many growers, is very often the best choice.

Why does size matter so much? It's easy to focus solely on the price tag for your inputs, but those costs must be viewed in context with the bigger picture. Smaller product forms (e.g., 512 vs. 288 plug) will have a lower input cost, but take longer to finish and have higher shrink rates. This can result in higher total cost and less profitability. By comparison, a larger product form is more expensive up front, but the saved time, energy and labor—along with reduced shrink—can often add up to a lower total cost over the production cycle.

The bottom line—With greenhouse space at a premium for many growers and profitability always pressured, a fundamental question is “does the young plant you produce, or the product form you produce or purchase, cost you money later in poor quality, additional labor, significant shrink or fewer turns in your available space?”

Total Growth Solutions offers a great tool to help you compare production costs using different product forms. Log on to www.totalgrowthsolutions.com and click on “Profitability Calculator.” **GT**

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