

GROWERTALKS

Features

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Go Big or Go ... Small?

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As perennial growers, we're under constant pressure to strike a balance between quality, cost and timing targets, while operating within the constraints of elements such as limited space, temperature, logistical issues and sales windows.

Before assuming that bigger, cheaper or faster is better, consider how all the pieces of your business fit together. Good sourcing decisions are made when one takes into account how the business functions as a whole and how the choice of plug size helps drive business results. The right decision isn't always obvious.

Pictured: Starting with small plugs, like this Iberis Purity, can help ensure you get the branching you want right from the start.



Here are some of the elements you may wish to consider when deciding on which plug size is best for any given crop.

1. Be on time. If you're like many perennial growers, proper crop timing can mean the difference between a crop generating profits for your business or generating losses. A crop ready after Mother's Day, for instance, or overlapping with the next crop a week too early, can affect the ability to move the crop in its entirety.

Choosing a plug size to meet your timing targets is essential. Spec a plug too small and you may miss the window entirely, as you try to force and feed and pinch the crop to get it to market. Spec too large and your crop may finish earlier than your customers want it, resulting in an overgrown (and perhaps wasted) crop. Consider the impact of being early or late and adjust your plug size according to the risk you're able to tolerate. Some growers will err on the side of being slightly early with the idea that it's usually easier to delay or slow a crop by moving it to colder temperatures, using PGRs or pinching than it is to hasten a crop along. This may be a viable solution until you can fine tune your scheduling abilities.

Improving your timing requires good record keeping and then actually using that information to get better. Keep detailed records of your actual crop timings over the years. Suppliers often provide a range of finish times, but these ranges can vary significantly because everyone grows differently. There's no substitute for

tracking what actually happens at your operation. Know your facilities, growing environments and growing practices, and how your plants respond to these inputs when grown from different plug sizes.

2. Speed it up. A larger plug can decrease your grow times, which also decreases your costs. It may also help you increase your turns by using the same growing space to produce more than one crop in a given time period.

Establishing some basic costing equations can help you determine if the reduced finishing time or additional turns actually saves you enough money to justify the increased cost of the larger plug.

In some cases, finishing the crop faster isn't a cost or space issue, but a production capacity issue. If all of your available production capacity is full during early spring, for instance, consider using a larger plug on the far side of your peak when capacity opens up again and you can still hit some of those early crop timings.

3. Junk in, junk out. Obviously, whether your plug is large or small, you should expect it to meet your quality standards. Sometimes a good quality crop is actually easier to achieve starting with smaller plugs.

In some cases, the architecture of the plug needs to have been managed a certain way in order for the finished crop to have the look you want. Plants such as iberis, lavandula, perovskia, helianthemum or gaillardia can develop woody stems quickly and require careful management from the earliest stages to ensure a well-crafted chassis. When such plants have been allowed to become stretched and woody, they can rarely be "repaired" with time or grower skill. If you're unable to consistently source larger plugs of the quality you require, sourcing smaller plugs may allow you more flexibility to craft the crop the way you want.

4. Don't lose it. Smaller plugs clearly save money on initial per-unit costs, but are more susceptible to loss early in the production cycle from environmental conditions or human error. A 288 won't last long if someone forgot to water it for a day in 90-degree heat. If you're struggling with crop loss early in the production cycle, consider increasing the size of your plugs initially until you can improve the capability of your people and processes.

On the flipside, some crops can do very well starting with a very small plug in a large container. Fast-growing plants in ideal conditions with careful grower management can be grown from small plants, providing you with some considerable savings with only a slight increase in grow time as a tradeoff. Experiment by gradually reducing plug sizes on crops that you're already growing with confidence.

5. Stay healthy. Depending on your source, a larger plug has the potential to be older and, therefore, more likely to be infected with insects or pathogens than a younger plant. Root diseases in particular can be quite troublesome, being more difficult to detect upon arrival and control once in your crop. Over time you're likely to notice which crops are more susceptible to these issues. If you're confident in your own ability to keep plants healthy, consider starting such crops with younger material that may not yet be inoculated with pathogens and grow it on with your own protocols in place.

6. Consider all costs. While unit cost is critical, many growers don't consider the big picture when making a purchasing decision. There are two areas where growers are most likely to make errors: The first mistake is

to forget about all the extra costs, such as freight, minimum order charges, fuel surcharges, brokerage and import fees, royalties and tag costs. These costs should always be considered as part of the final unit cost. Freight on larger plugs in particular can be a real shock and can quickly eat up any profit on that crop if not properly accounted for.

The second mistake is to disregard the hidden costs of choosing the wrong plug size for the target being aimed for. Saving a few cents on a plug might look attractive on paper, but if it results in a crop that's late or of poor quality, you save nothing. Be sure to consider how all costs are impacted by plug size, not just the initial input cost.

At the end of the day, there's no substitute for a grower's experience in navigating what can be at times a maze of considerations. The grower is part engineer, part chef and part artist whose success requires a combination of science, experience and instinct. Combining these and other considerations when making plug-sizing decisions will help reduce all those hidden costs and variable results that put a drain on your business and ensure you generate more profitable results. **GT**

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