

GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Production

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There's a Bug on My Plant!

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Two friends and I were chatting with a random couple by a hotel pool. The man asked each of us in turn what we did. Nursing student and accounts payable both got nods and relevant questions regarding their day-to-day.

My turn: I quickly explained that I worked at a nursery and was responsible for pest management.

"Well," chuckled Mr. "It's certainly not politically correct to call them pests these days, is it?"

It dawned on me: They thought I worked with children!

I quickly tried to save some face. "PLANTS! I work with plants, pests—problems, like bugs and diseases ..." I floundered.

"Oh!" They were smiling heartily again. "Interesting!"

The way things are going, with continual loss of chemical tools and a greater understanding and concern for human and environmental health, using biological controls is becoming more and more of an industry standard. But, while we all might know what IPM is and what Orius are, the general public is more or less oblivious to the fact that when we can label our plants as pesticide-free, it means there might be the odd aphid mummy or escapee thrips hanging out on it.

Fact: IPM as we know it now will never achieve eerily perfect, sigh-of-relief control like the old chemistry did. Nor will our bios realize "it's shipping time!" and courteously leave the plant to find somewhere else to forage.

All the public knows about killing bad bugs is that the old chemistry wiped out everything—good and bad. Especially alarming was that they could harm humans and their furry friends.

As the applicators and handlers of the poisons, we didn't like the idea of harming ourselves either. And who even likes spraying and having to wear a suit and mask when it's 27 degrees Celsius out anyways?

So we've moved on to using more "soft" chemicals, cultural methods and biological controls. But as we changed gears, things became more complicated and scientific. And the public is kind of ignorant of the control options replacing the bad chemicals, to put it bluntly.

I don't think I've met one person outside of the industry who has any idea what IPM is, which makes sense. Not everyone knows what an AED or BVM is either. That doesn't mean people shouldn't know what they stand for—both could save a life.

While IPM isn't nearly as critical as that, in the long term, the goal is to produce safer products in a safer way. It's

becoming very obvious that we need to make the public aware of—and okay with—having the odd, good creepy crawly on their plants.

But how?!

IPM fits in with buzzwords like “sustainability” and “environmentally friendly” ... guaranteed it will resonate with my concerned, tree-hugging generation.

What we really need is growers to communicate what we’re attempting with IPM to the general public. Just like the ugly fruit and vegetable campaigns, agriculturally educated consumers who don’t mind the odd spot or deformity on their pepper will also not mind bringing a plant home with a resident predatory mite.

I mean, what’s cooler than a biological like brown lacewings or parasitic wasps? They’re like SEAL bugs! Post tidbits on social media! Give a tech-savvy scout a YouTube account and a decent filming device! Put a small picture/explanation on the care tag. Somebody please do a TED talk! (Not me—public speaking makes me feel a little like I imagine those aphids felt when I let the lacewings loose.)

As much as I love what I do, it would be handy if I didn’t have to practically take the nice couple in the hotel to school when they asked me about work. And it would be nice to know that our retail customers understood why there was a six-legged friend on their beautiful plant. **GT**

Sylvia Schaap works in IPM at Qualitree Propagators in British Columbia, Canada, spending free time hiking, hunting, writing and drawing in mountains she now calls home.