

GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Production

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Looking Forward to the First Spring

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It could be an exciting year ahead. We're embarking on a new era. Gone are the days of ebb-and-flood benches. We found it challenging to grow a wide assortment of plants in smaller lots of 72 and 128 plug trays that need various watering regimes on these benches. Now we'll be growing on roll benches with wire mesh bases providing better drainage and airflow. Boom and hand watering/feeding will be the order of the day. For some of our growers, it will be back to basics, and for others, who have limited experience, it will be totally different.

A new greenhouse with new infrastructure will always involve a learning curve. The bays are wider and the roof vents open wider. Does this affect the humidity, light levels and stability of the overall climate? For the first time in these houses, we used double poly on the roof with a diffusing light feature. This resulted in no shady or sunny spots.

We also installed more HAF fans, which means fewer microclimates and a more uniform environment. How evenly can we apply our favorite materials, RootShield Plus and ON-Gard, as well as other fertilizers, beneficials and pesticides? How wet do we want our prop starter cells to be on our watering scale? How fast will the Growcoon cells dry out on the mesh benches compared to the old solid bottom ebb-and-flood tables? How do we efficiently handle plug trays on the new roll tables? These are all questions that need to be answered, and as there aren't a lot of URCs being stuck in early January, it's a good time to conduct some trials to find out.

While this was going on at the home base, I once again had the pleasure of attending MANTS. My time there consisted of helping out in our booth, meeting current customers, and hopefully, persuading new ones to try our products. The show, as usual, is a great environment for general networking and to see what's new that might be of interest to our greenhouse or bareroot field production sites.

As many of my usual readers know, I tend to focus on the BCA world. One very helpful thing that I found at MANTS

was a new poster being offered by BASF outlining all of the major “good guys” and the pests that they help to control (Figure 1).

A number of the photos for this poster were supplied by Suzanne Wainwright-Evans, the number one “Bug Lady” of our BCA world. Any of you who haven’t had the pleasure of interacting with her are certainly missing something. I’m sure she’ll again be at Cultivate’20 sharing her knowledge in her usual passionate way. The BASF posters were very new and I expect will be quite popular at Cultivate’20.

Spending time in our booth also allowed me to study some of our products and reflect on how we produce certain items. When we changed to the Growcoon rooting system, we conducted some in-house growing trials to see how cells would root out into a new growing environment. Subsequently, we had positive feedback from our liner customers, but how rooting would take place in our bareroot field production was still an unknown quantity last spring.



I did some field checks throughout the season and also checked bins of lifted roots in our warehouse during the processing operation prior to being stored in the cooler. Checking some perovskia roots on display at our booth reassured me that the Growcoon cell was a complete success. The roots of a Growcoon plug produced from a URC grown in the greenhouse grew straight through the decomposable material and produced a very healthy root stock. These plugs had a second application of our aforementioned favorite materials before being planted in the field (Figure 2).

It was also exciting to see the results of our Configure treatments applied to the cutting material just after the propagation rooting phase of the production process. New extra breaks were produced at the base of the cuttings, which obviously provide extra bulk for our customers. We know that we get extra breaks in a lot of our greenhouse-grown plugs, but treating a number of our field-grown bareroot items was new for us this year and it’s exciting to see the positive results.

With a slightly modified field planting process planned for this year, some in the Configure trial applications are on my wish list. If we can have more success with different varieties, then our customers will be even happier with our home-grown bareroot crops. **GT**

Roger McGaughey, head grower at Pioneer Gardens in Deerfield, Massachusetts, was educated in Northern Ireland and England and has 47 years experience as a grower.