

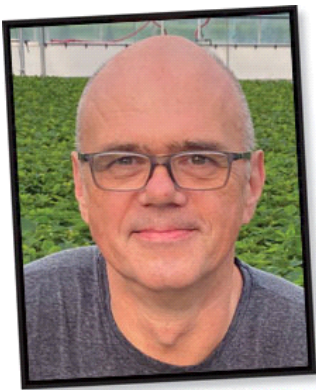
GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Production

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Large Muscle Movement

Albert Grimm



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By the time you read this column we'll feel the madness of spring production. Every year we enter this season with a promise to get better at managing stress. We vow to delegate more, to stay cool under pressure and not to blow up when the safety valves let go.

Every year we fail in these good intentions. It's not our fault. Unrealistic deadlines, unexpected crop problems and not least the weather are creating stress that takes over our bodies. We begin to run on pure adrenaline. Stress hormones take over our bodies. They literally shut down those parts of our cognitive brain that we need to stay cool, calm and collected. We don't even notice when this happens because most of us enjoy the initial "thrill" of this wild ride, even though each reiteration puts a cumulative toll on our mental and physical health.

Stress is built into our job description. No grower is perfect. Even the best of us will experience crop problems. Growers, however, get paid to prevent problems and disasters, and whoever holds the purse strings has limited tolerance for any loss. It's our job to anticipate everything that might possibly go wrong and prevent it from happening. We accomplish this by repeating what worked previously and by not repeating what didn't work. The best among us are those who've lived through the most greenhouse problems and accumulated the most wisdom about what NOT to do. With experience, we can anticipate disasters long before anybody else sees them.

There are times when this feels like piloting a freight train that's heading full steam towards a sharp bend in the track while everybody else has fun in the dining car. The handle is broken, there's no way to slow down and all we can do is wait for the crash, just like old Charlie in the famous Jethro Tull song.

The accumulated stress and anxiety of living through these failures changes our personality. A degree of plant-watcher's paranoia becomes second nature. This may be an essential element for success in our jobs, but it creates a constant state of hyper-anxiety, which causes many of us to suffer.

So how do we prevent this stress from taking over our lives and keep our passion alive? For me, one of the best self-help books to address greenhouse paranoia was written by Mark Manson and carries the rather vulgar title: "The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F...". Now, don't let the unsavory title stop you: It's merely meant to grab your attention. This book taught me to be savvy about my limited ability to control things. Much of what causes my stress is outside of my control. For this reason, it's useless to get stressed. This concept is simple, but practice is fiendishly difficult.

None of us are perfect. We all have limits. The most that anybody can ask from us is our best, but grower anxiety

causes us to get stressed even when we do give our best. Our best isn't always good enough, and we feel guilt and anger whenever we fail to control the uncontrollable. This creates another layer of anxiety because we feel guilty for getting angry despite our pledge to stay cool. So we double down on being perfect at every level and, of course, we fail again. All the while more uncontrollable stuff adds to the anguish. Mr. Manson calls this "the feedback loop from hell."

We cannot control these external stressors; we can only control our response. Do remember, though, that our bodies are flooded with stress hormones. The human stress management system was designed to deal with saber-tooth tigers and the brain tends to get in the way of the necessary fight-or-flight response, so the hormones turn it off. If we want to regain control, we need to recognize the symptoms of our stress response, which include a severely compromised capacity to think. We must learn to take timeouts until our brains have safely rebooted.

If you pay attention, you can feel these hormones. They increase your heartrate and make you sweat. They give you physical discomfort when your muscles are getting pumped for action. We can no longer think clearly. When you feel that stress takes over, move your large muscles. Stop what you're doing and go for a very brisk walk around the block. Go to the gym if necessary. Physical activity burns off adrenalin. You'll feel better. It does require self-discipline, but it's worth the effort. **GT**

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