GROWERTALKS

Features

11/1/2024

Greener Growth

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Sustainability can be implemented in every step of the supply chain. In floriculture, that begins with the growers.

“As a company, we have found that the sustainable practices we have implemented over the years are not only better for the Earth, but they’re also good for business,” said Art VanWingerden, co-CEO of Metrolina Greenhouses. “That’s why we continue to research new ways to implement sustainable practices that are both environmentally and financially responsible.”

Growers who are approaching sustainability or looking to do more in terms of best practices can benefit from expert, research-driven resources to create cohesive processes within their businesses. The American Floral Endowment (AFE)—a nonprofit organization that has supported the industry for over 60 years through donor investments to fund research, education and academic opportunities—has recognized the need for such resources for growers and beyond.

In early 2024, AFE launched Sustainabloom, a collaborative initiative that’s grown into a comprehensive resource hub for businesses in every segment of the floral community.

“The Sustainabloom program is a major step forward in AFE’s commitment to providing free education and advancements to foster resiliency in the floriculture industry,” said Debi Chedester, Executive Director of AFE. “We understand that sustainability is not a trend nor a fad, but an essential movement in keeping the industry thriving well into the future. As the largest charitable organization in the industry, AFE is positioned to take the lead on ensuring that all members of the industry are well-informed about the steps they can take to start or improve their sustainability efforts.”

Industry-inclusive guidance

The Sustainabloom initiative was started in 2021 with top researchers in the field gathering more than 1,000 pieces of information drawn from academic journals, reports and other resources. Headed up by Dr. Melinda Knuth, assistant professor of horticultural sciences, and Amanda Solliday, a horticulture science Ph.D. candidate, both from North Carolina State University, the team simplified and organized the information into a series of industry guided categories including:

- Circular Economy and Engagement
- Composting
- Consumer Demands and Preferences
- H-2A/H-2B Work Visa
- Integrated Pest Management
- Living Wage
- Nutrient Management
- Plastics
- Substrates
- Water Conservation
- Carbon Accounting/Footprint
- Energy Efficiency
- Lighting

Each guide contains topical information, including clear definitions, tips, financial benefits, how-tos, checklists, regulation information and best practices related to the category, as well as links to additional resources. The information is further broken down to address various specific segments within the industry.

AFE's goal with the program is to not only develop comprehensive guides and resources, but to house them together in a central location for easy access by industry members. The Sustainabloom website also features up-to-date floriculture sustainability news and industry spotlight articles that detail what initiatives members of the floral community are implementing to reach their sustainability goals.

Grower-specific insights

The comprehensive guides available specifically for growers are broken into several topic areas, providing more in-depth coverage and ensuring the information is manageable for all growers at any stage of sustainability efforts.

For example, a guide detailing Integrated Pest Management (IPM) provides tips on how to identify and monitor pests, and the steps needed to reduce the use of pesticides, resulting in reduced pesticide resistance and improved worker safety. The guide breaks down the steps to get started with an IPM strategy, which can be thought of as a continuum. A grower might start by adopting a small practice, such as pest identification, and over time implement more IPM tools into their program, eventually working up to practices such as the incorporation of biologicals, crop rotation or other combinations of strategies they identify as being feasible for their operation.

Growers can also learn from Sustainabloom's guides on Nutrient Management. The research offers information regarding which forms of nutrients are found in organic and inorganic fertilizer sources, and the importance of using fertilizers responsibly. When it comes to potting media, growers can also consider sustainability strategies regarding substrates. Substrate choice can be a tool to not only optimize plant growth, but also reduce fertilizer and pesticide inputs, as well as reduce pest and disease pressure. The program guide that covers this topic walks growers through where to start, including how-tos on making substrates, selecting the most sustainable options when purchasing and recycling in the process.

The reduction in the use of plastics is also a major strategic sustainable move on the part of growers in the floriculture industry. According to Sustainbloom's research, a single plastic item can take hundreds of thousands of years to break down. Growers can use the program guide to learn how to start effectively using the "R" approach and learn more about the different types of plastic and which are more toxic than others. The guide also introduces growers to plastic alternatives used by other industry professionals, such as the Jiffy Pot and EcoGrow.

As a companion to the research-rich guides, Sustainabloom's resources for growers also include assessment tools to help determine where a grower is in his or her sustainable efforts and where he or she can improve. Growers can also gain valuable insights about certifications that can elevate their businesses and about government funding options that may be available. There are several incentive programs and state-specific funding programs offered.

"For growers who are looking for guidance throughout their journey toward adopting sustainable practices, Sustainabloom is a valuable source of knowledge and practical, comprehensive guides on a variety of topics that are easy to use and understand, and extremely helpful," said Art. "No matter where you are in the process—a complete novice or with decades of experience under your belt—everyone can use these resources for guidance and continued education because this journey is not linear. There's always something to learn."

An ever-evolving program

Although still in its infancy, Sustainabloom has already developed into a tremendous resource for the floral community. As trends in floriculture continue, Debi said the program will continue to expand, including the addition of eight new guides expected to be published by the end of the year. Those guides will focus on Carbon Accounting, DEI, Living Wage, Health and Perennial Leaf, Professional Development, Energy Efficiency for Growers, and Grower and Supplier Inventory Management.

"The Sustainabloom website is updated regularly with the latest industry news and additional resources as our research team completes them," she said. "It will continue to evolve as the industry does. It truly has become an indispensable resource, especially for growers, and we look forward to the wonderful resources we can provide to all industry members in the near future."

AFE's commitment to advancing the floriculture industry is supported by top research analysis of sustainability best practices in all areas of the industry and ensuring that those resources are accessible to growers and all industry professionals. In addition to Sustainabloom's resources and guides, AFE offers additional information to growers, including the Thrips and Botrytis Research Library, a monthly Grow Pro Webinar Series, and quarterly Growing Further Newsletter. **GT**

Carla Dempsey is a seasoned freelance writer and editor with over 25 years of experience as a professional journalist and magazine writer. She covers the Sustainabloom initiative for the American Floral Endowment, bringing her expertise to the forefront of sustainability in the floral industry.