

GROWERTALKS

Paul's Pointers

12/1/2024

Preventatives Make Sense (and Save Dollars)

Paul Pilon

Depending on the focus, size and customer base, many perennial growers are growing hundreds to thousands of different perennial varieties across numerous sizes. Rarely are two growing operations alike when it comes to what they grow, how they grow and the responsibilities the growers perform. Additionally, there are often large variances in the amount of experience the growing staff has within each operation. With all this being said, do you know one of the largest limiting factors all of us face?

It's time. There are only so many hours in a day. As the season progresses and spring approaches, growers have more tasks to perform, more area to cover and more fires to put out (hot spots of pests and/or diseases). As the growing areas become larger, responsibilities increase, hot spots arise and time becomes more limited, growers often allow their growing practices to slip.

I'm not judging, as I'm just as guilty as anybody for allowing this to happen myself. As available time erodes, it's only natural for something to slide. Unfortunately, time and time again growers allow the fundamentals of production (Horticulture 101) to slide when things get busy. Think about it—growers are so busy producing and selling their products in such narrow time frames that it makes perfect sense for them to focus on the things that pay the bills today rather than focusing on the tasks that pay future bills.



Pictured: Besides evaluating pest populations using sticky cards and “beat” samples, scouting should include visual inspections of both the top growth (left) and the root system (right) to detect any problems or plant health concerns.

However, these compromises often not only jeopardize future crops, but they often affect near-term crops as well. What types of tasks do growers frequently allow to slip? There's no clear-cut answer to this, but I frequently see growers ease up on their nutritional monitoring (pH and EC), plant maintenance (pinching, trimming and spacing), and their scouting and pest management practices. All of these tasks are very important to produce high-quality perennials and all of these activities should be performed consistently from the start of a crop up until it's sold.

An ounce of prevention

I really believe the age old axiom, “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.” Benjamin Franklin famously used this exact phrase when he advised fire-threatened Philadelphians in 1736, encouraging them that it was better to prevent fires rather than fighting existing ones. When it comes to growing plants, this phrase essentially implies it’s more costly and detrimental to wait to address crop issues rather than managing them when they first arise.

Scouting

When I think about preventative activities, the first thing that comes to mind is pest and disease management. One of the most important approaches is to utilize routine scouting to detect pests and diseases as they first arise. Scouting essentially entails monitoring crops, detecting the presence of any potential insect and disease problems, and determining when control strategies must be taken. Routine monitoring and early detection helps growers prevent small problems from becoming big ones.

There are numerous variations of scouting and how it’s performed, but I can tell you the majority of the growers I’ve worked with over the years don’t have solid scouting programs in place and those that do often lessen the intensity of their scouting programs when things get busy.

I encourage you to establish routine weekly scouting programs if you don’t already have one in place. If you already do, I encourage you to evaluate how you’re scouting and to make a commitment to keep it going regardless of how busy you become.

Preventative activities

Since I began working in the greenhouse industry over 30 years ago, preventative strategies have always been an essential part of my growing practices. This approach has proven to be highly beneficial in preventing pests and diseases from becoming problems altogether or keeping them in check when they were present. Preventative programs can include the routine release of biological control agents (BCAs), applications of biosolutions products and/or using traditional chemistries.

I once was under the impression that preventative programs were best suited for growers that didn’t have consistent scouting programs in place. However, over the years, I’ve learned this isn’t true. Preventative programs not only complement scouting practices, but they also play a key role at preventing problems from occurring and/or keeping small issues from becoming large ones.

There are costs associated with preventive activities, but what are the costs and/or consequences of not having them? In many instances, not only does the presence and damage from pests and diseases cause a reduction in quality, they’re harder to manage and control once injury to the crops is detected. Prevention is somewhat like affordable insurance policies that keep you from having devastating losses.

Preventative programs not only make SENSE, they SAVE dollars!

Scouting Basics

- Make weekly random up-close visual inspections.
- Observing plants from only the main aisles or on vehicles isn’t sufficient.
- Take “beat” samples to dislodge pests such as thrips and spider mites so they can be observed and counted over white surfaces (paper, clipboards, etc.).
- Utilize sticky cards to detect and monitor flying insects such as fungus gnats, thrips and whiteflies.

- Evaluate pest population trends over time to determine if they're increasing or decreasing. This is useful to determine if control strategies need to be implemented or if additional management is necessary.
- Scouting takes dedication and discipline—make the commitment and stick with it.

Paul Pilon is editor-at-large of the Perennial Pulse e-newsletter and Director of Growing at Opel Growers in Hudsonville, Michigan. He can be reached at paul@opelgrowers.com.