GROWERTALKS

Features

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Tech On Demand Team Profile: Chris Ferguson

Bill Calkins

Before diagnosing and managing greenhouse challenges, some groundwork needs to be set—especially having a clear understanding of the specific operation, production protocols, crops involved and, of course, the people who make it all happen. Ball Seed Technical Services Specialist Dr. Chris Ferguson not only has the greenhouse experience and educational background to put the pieces together, but also a strong desire to work side-by-side with customers, determining what will work best for them and their production teams who'll eventually implement the strategies recommended.

Pictured: Chris has seen a lot of crops in production and his hands-on approach leads to production changes that result in high quality and reduced losses.

Boots on the ground

Chris is a hands-on guy and the Ball Seed customers and partners he's worked with so far quickly realized he understands the ins and outs of real-world greenhouse production. Traveling to greenhouses and digging into problems is where his skills rise to the surface.

"I've never been a cubicle guy," he explained. "I like to get out there and see people—and appreciate that every day in our industry is different."

It's these unique daily situations and the strategies required to navigate them that get Chris fired up and ready to work through challenges.

With a strong background in integrated pest management (IPM), Chris is quick to share expertise when dealing with pests and diseases.

"I like to help customers think about their entire operation before running to the pesticide cabinet," he said. "Pesticides and biocontrols will still be used, but if we can identify a few cultural practices in the greenhouse that

need to be modified, we can likely lower pressure and discover long-term solutions that make controls more effective."

Experience matters

When Chris works with Ball Seed customers to develop custom solutions (for pest control, production planning, crop strategies and more) he brings experience as a large-scale greenhouse and nursery IPM manager, plant pathology and diagnostics technician, and plenty of time working hands-on in greenhouses and nurseries.

"During my bachelor's at Western Kentucky, I worked on the garden crew designing and maintaining landscapes, growing the annuals and perennials used around campus. In my master's program, I worked at the research farm usually operating tractors to till, plant and spray crops, in addition to assisting with research trials," he said. "Then I earned my doctorate in plant medicine from the University of Florida, specializing in pests, diseases and IPM strategies."

While working towards his doctorate, Chris also worked in a plant pathology laboratory assisting in new fungicide trials on various crops, such as cotton, soybean, watermelon and corn—rating incidence and severity of pathogens.

"In the lab, I assisted in isolating fungal and bacterial pathogens for use in future trials," he added. "During this time, I also had an internship in the UF Plant Diagnostic Laboratory learning the processes involved in diagnosing disease samples."

All of this experience and training underpins Chris' passion for helping growers develop creative solutions to tackle issues and produce the highest quality young plants and finished crops.

Goal-oriented approach

"Plant pathology and IPM have been my focus for more than a decade now," he explained. "Between my experience in the pathology lab in college and as a nursery IPM manager, I've spent a lot of time concentrating on prevention and management of common [and uncommon] pests and pathogens."

Pest control products (synthetic and biological) are effective, but many times these issues are driven by improper growing practices, he said. This is where Chris' side-by-side approach truly benefits growers interested in getting to the root of problems and avoiding them in the future—saving time, money and a lot of frustration.

Looking at the big picture, one of Chris' long-term goals is to help build informational resources for the industry, especially related to the most common diseases impacting hundreds (perhaps thousands) of greenhouses each season.

"Growers may think about life cycles of pests, but not so much about the life cycles of pathogens," he said. "Thinking of a pathogen like an insect—how it grows, reproduces, overwinters, and where and how long it can stick around—will help determine future management strategies."

Pictured: It's family first for Chris and he enjoys sharing hobbies with his wife and three kids—especially keeping his old Jeep up and running.

Fun facts: Chris is a family guy, with a wife and three kids. Spending time with each of them doing what interests them keeps him plenty busy when he's not visiting greenhouses. He also loves to be outdoors and enjoys deer

hunting, fishing, hiking, working on his old Jeep and experimenting with tissue culture in the basement. **GT**

Chris on Lantana

In two recent videos, Chris took growers through receiving, prioritizing and handling lantana URCs and through all stages up until transplant. His goal was to help reduce risk and produce top-quality liners.

Following up on the prop video, Chris then delved into finishing tips and tricks. With new lantana breeding and huge consumer demand comes a need for top-quality finishing strategies, so the absolute best plants go to market. Delivering the best quality comes down to production planning and best practices, and Chris shared what production teams need to know.

Propagation

Finishing