GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Production

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Breaking the Rules (Thoughtfully)

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A while back while sitting at the hairdresser, I glanced up at the wall and noticed her certification framed and on display. She'd been doing hair for over a decade, so I asked her about her formal training. We chatted and compared for a while before she playfully asked, "So … did you go to school specifically for lavender?" I laughed, explaining that university had covered the broad strokes of animal agriculture and horticulture. Nothing in my classes shared the specifics on trimming lavender, the rooting habits of spruce or how heathers respond to temperature spikes. Curious, I asked her, "So how specific does it get in hair school?"

Her answer inspired this article. She said, "They taught us the rules so we know how to properly break them once we're out in the real world." Thank you, Brooke.

The saying, "This is how we've always done it" is such a mixed bag. On one hand, it brings some confidence, a "tried-and-true" feeling we can rest on and work with. After all, the methods we chose to accept as canon were born from real success. On the other hand, it brings up niggling questions, "So what if we can do this better? What if other ways haven't been tried before? What if things are different now?"

Stepping into Qualitree years ago and learning the ropes, I now realize how true that was for us as growers, too. Propagation came with a non-negotiable set of rules. Keep humidity high. Seal in moisture. Don't overthink it. Plastic tunnels, covers and tents were standard. You misted by feel and handheld sensors, trusted the plastic to keep cuttings from collapsing, and hoped the afternoon sun didn't cook everything underneath. Most of the time it worked. Cuttings rooted, plugs hit pots, finished material rolled out the door.

I give our propagation lead, Chris, a lot of credit. For a long time he lobbied for propagation to take place in the open under the mist system that came with the then-brand-new greenhouse. Pulling plastic for a bit of air exchange, checking rooting progress or applications of biologicals was a real pain. It was disruptive to the crop and could pull cuttings out of their tray. For long-prop crops, plastic gets slimy (especially against the floor) and makes no sense to be reused.

Cupressus was a crop that was particularly annoying to propagate. We would tent over them to prevent the plastic from resting on the plants and causing all sorts of moisture-related fallout. Chris had a fire in his belly when he got the green light to give it a go, sans plastic. He'll tell you it wasn't a perfect start for his small test, but I remember the

positive vibrations throughout the team when the dust settled at the end of that prop cycle. Higher yield, shorter rooting time, fewer pain points in managing the crop at this critical stage. Needless to say, it was a quick transition to all of our cupressus being propagated this way.

Over the years, Chris and team tackled the rest of our crops, trial by trial, and at this point we're barely touching those rolls of plastic. The important parts were starting with small blocks, recording what decisions and setpoints were made, and summarizing to feel confident in copy-pasting the approach when eventually scaling up.

Think about the other ways we can take foundational information or rules and bend them to our advantage. We may read that, "Applying too much of this growth regulator can lead to bud abortion." Fair enough, but what if my goal isn't bud development at that stage? What if I'm intentionally trying to hold a crop vegetative to time it with a market window or stretch a production cycle? In that case, the "don't" becomes a strategic "do." We read, "Growing the crop under darker conditions leads to stretched internodes and weak growth." True, if the weakness goes unaddressed. But what if controlled elongation is exactly what we want and I can support the plant strength nutritionally?

Same with timing. "Only take cuttings of this genus in winter." Says who? Genetics change. Facilities change. Climate changes. Try taking a few in spring and watch how the plant responds. You might discover that the rule was built for someone else's environment and set up, but not yours. And then there's the old classic: "Never water late in the day." In some operations and situations, that's still sound advice. But in others, with the right airflow and crop stage, a late-day irrigation might be what prevents collapse rather than causes it. Knowing your crop and knowing what's going to happen at the root zone and in the micro-climate around your plant above the soil (whether you irrigate or not) will drive your decision on if it's the right thing to do.

Good growers know the rules. Great growers understand why the rules were made. Exceptional growers adapt, and when necessary, deliberately break those rules. Just remember to write down what you did! **GT**

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