GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Production

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The Weight of Water

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Recently, I booked a seat on a tour of notable local horticultural operations hosted by a regional greenhouse growers' association. Stepping behind the scenes of these businesses offered more than a technical overview; it provided a valuable perspective on which practices are succeeding and the challenges growers continue to navigate.

As we moved through each facility, a shared sense of ardor became apparent in the way the growers spoke about their work and guided visitors through their spaces. Some operations were in the off-season, focused on planning for upcoming crops, while others were immersed in full, year-round vegetable production. Yet regardless of how full or empty the greenhouses were at the time, each one stood out as remarkable in its own way. Visiting these state-of-the-art facilities was both inspiring and grounding, offering a clear picture of the industry at its best—where technology and innovation support thoughtful, skilled growing.

Coming from a smaller, hands-on, direct-to-consumer enterprise, I found myself both impressed and slightly overwhelmed by the sheer scale of these operations. Massive, fully automated greenhouses—harvesting several semi-truck loads of produce each week—stood in sharp contrast to the kind of work I'm accustomed to. Despite our very cold winters and short days, these facilities produce top-quality crops year-round, relying on sophisticated automation and equipment that precisely optimize every production input.

Another stop on the tour featured a skillfully run bedding plant operation specializing in wholesale liners. Each stop was intentionally chosen for its ability to impress and inspire, and collectively they succeeded in doing just that. Yet amid the spectacle of size, speed and efficiency, I found myself reflecting more quietly. I began to consider what lessons might translate back to my own team and what common ground I shared with these growers. Beneath the differences in scale and technology there was a familiar commitment to careful planning, problem-solving and pride in producing high-quality products.

One question surfaced repeatedly throughout the tour: Where do you get your water? Both of these greenhouse operations highlighted their extensive water storage capacity, relying primarily on rainfall collected from their roofs. Given the exceptionally dry conditions we've experienced in the region, water supply has become a critical consideration for greenhouse operators, nursery growers, market gardeners, etc. Whether influenced by shifting rainfall patterns linked to climate change or simply by our location within a drought-prone prairie landscape, the

reality is the same—it's essential to be intentional about where our water comes from.

One facility was conveniently situated beside a very large lake and I initially assumed that water sourcing would be among their lesser concerns. However, when asked, the grower explained that the water quality wasn't suitable for production use. In that moment, a realization settled in. Despite differences in scale, location and technology, we all shared the same fundamental challenge: the need to secure reliable, high-quality water to support our crops.

Water management plays a big role in everything we do in the greenhouse. While managing pH and nutrient levels in our irrigation water is important, it's only one part of the process. Our growing team checks stock tanks daily and fixes leaky hoses as soon as they're spotted. Teaching the right way to water plants is essential for keeping crops healthy and protecting our water supply. Although watering techniques can be one of the harder skills to teach, there are some great online tutorials that help reinforce proper practices. It can take time for seasonal staff to see water as a valuable resource, but once they understand why we do things a certain way, they're much more likely to watch for and prevent water waste.

It's mid-winter now and when I look at the hills around us—since we're located in a slight basin—I'm not seeing much of a snowpack. The spring melt from those slopes is what usually fills the outdoor pond we rely on when rainfall doesn't fully recharge our tanks. Of course, weather is unpredictable and we could still see heavy snowfall or soaking spring rains, but it's something we're keeping a close eye on.

The situation may not be quite that precarious, as we do have options beyond precipitation, and so far we've been fortunate not to need them. Greenhouse growers tend to be an optimistic group—we plan crops, analyze costs and forecast sales, all while hoping for a stable, cooperative relationship with a very mercurial Mother Nature. This season, my thoughts are with growers everywhere and with the shared hope that there'll be enough water to sustain us through another growing cycle. **GT**

Trudy Watt has a Bachelor's of Horticulture and is a Canadian Accredited Floral Designer. She's worked as an educator, a grower and in retail horticulture for over 30 years. She's most at home in a garden center, connecting people with plants.