

GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Business

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The Most Expensive Trial is the One You Skip

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Another season at the Raker-Roberta's Trial Gardens is complete. The plants and signs may be coming out, but the work—and the learning—is far from finished.

Operating a trial garden has obvious expenses: plants, substrate, containers, irrigation, equipment and labor. Less visible costs include planning, coordinating with breeders, receiving and tracking material, data collection, photography, grounds care, and visitor events. We also use land that could otherwise support production.

Plants may grow on sunshine and water; trial gardens, unfortunately, do not. So is trialing worth the investment? Maybe the better question is: What would it cost us not to trial?

Skipping the trial doesn't make risk disappear; it sends it downstream to the young plant producer, finished grower, retailer and, eventually, the consumer. Problems rarely get cheaper as they travel.

A credible trial involves more than planting varieties and waiting for applause. With hundreds or thousands of entries, "just plant it when it gets here" isn't much of a plan. Material must arrive at the right time, be identified and labeled correctly, and receive consistent care under relevant conditions. Someone has to evaluate performance, record the results and explain what they mean.

Every new variety carries unknowns and somebody will pay to uncover them. We can learn in a controlled trial before making major commitments. We can learn during commercial production, when the greenhouse is full and orders need to be filled. Or we can wait until retail, and recruit consumers as our unpaid trial participants. Consumers rarely appreciate being included in the research without their knowledge.

An insufficiently evaluated variety can mean weak branching, extra labor, disease issues, shipping damage, retail shrink, claims and disappointed customers. And surprises are considerably less charming when there are 20,000 units of them sitting in the greenhouse. Trialing gives us a chance to find a problem while it's still small enough to manage.

Our specialty cut flower program offers a good example. The prevailing sentiment from the industry was simple: no plant growth regulators. Ever. Sounds good in theory, but reality is much different. No PGRs means we have to ship a leggy plug or liner, our customer has to establish it in the field and produce a dependable finished crop. Plants, inconveniently, don't always respect our strongly held opinions.

This led us to trialing PGR rates during the young plant stage and following the plants through finished performance in our Cut Flower Garden. The results challenged some assumptions and gave us confidence to use appropriate rates for certain genera. The grow-out also gave us proof we could show customers. We can share the rates and explain the reasoning, but when a grower can stand in front of the plants and compare the finished results, the conversation changes.

Otherwise, we can spend heavily on the trial, collect mountains of information and do exactly what we were going to do anyway. At that point, we've created a very attractive and very expensive garden. The most valuable crop coming out of a trial is the information.

Of course, trialing isn't a crystal ball. One location, one season and one production system cannot predict every outcome. (Hello, regionality.) A strong Michigan performance doesn't answer every question about Florida or Texas. A mild season may conceal weaknesses, while a hot or wet year may expose problems we would otherwise miss. Michigan weather may not give us consistency, but it does give us data.

The goal is to reduce uncertainty enough to improve the decision. Independent trial sites, grower trials and commercial evaluations each add evidence. Even failure has value if it prevents a larger loss or points to a better production strategy. An honest trial must be capable of changing our minds. If every variety wins, we're probably hosting a beauty pageant.

The return on trialing doesn't always arrive with a dollar sign attached. Sometimes it's a variety that never makes the assortment, a problem caught before thousands of units are scheduled or a recommendation revised. Sometimes it's fewer credits and complaints, better information for a breeder or greater customer confidence because they saw the results themselves.

Some of the strongest returns are the losses that never happen. That makes trialing a little like preventive maintenance: it can look least valuable precisely when it's working. Inconvenient for the spreadsheet. Excellent for the business.

Trialing costs money, space, discipline and time. Skipping it simply postpones the cost of learning. The choice is whether we pay early, while information can still guide the next decision, or later, when the crop is scheduled, the greenhouse is full and the customer is waiting. Later is certainly more dramatic. It's also much more expensive. **GT**

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