

Plant Trialing Conference Notes; Late-Season Poinsettia Issues



Tags & Labels Online
Tags & Labels On Time

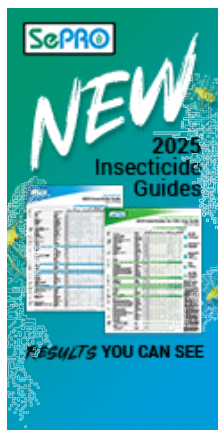
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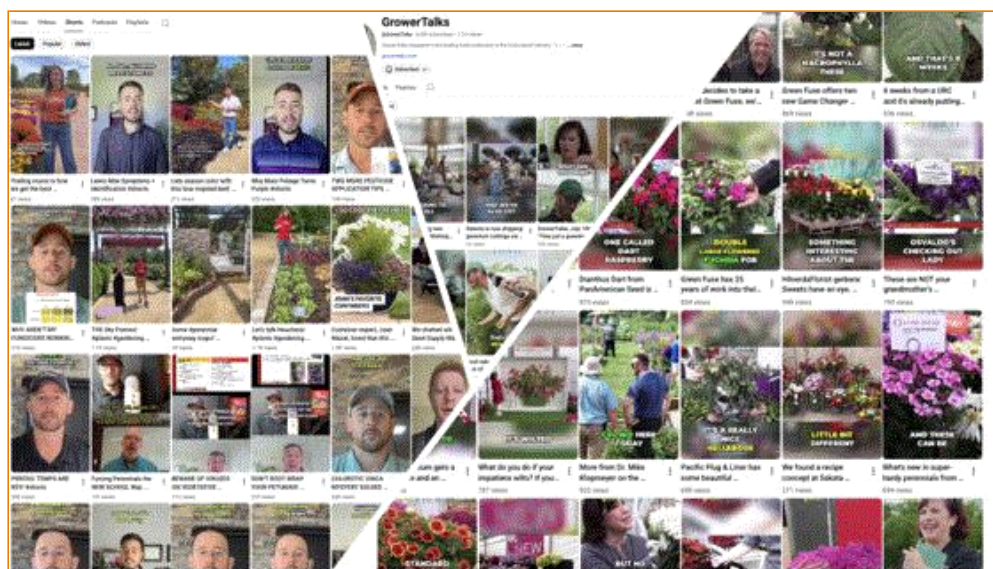
COMING UP THIS WEEK:

200+ YouTube Shorts
Nick's Tip: Poinsettia Crud
Poinsettia Info from e-GRO
Plant Trialing Best Practices
In-Ground & Container Trialing
Finish Line ...



200+ YouTube Shorts for Greenhouse Professionals

Many of you might be aware—because some of these have more than 1,000 views—that the *GrowerTalks* and Tech On Demand teams have been releasing tons of YouTube Shorts in the past year or so covering topics that I think you'll all really like. From new varieties and popular annuals, veggies and perennials to crop culture and greenhouse production best practices, you and your team can watch quick videos (fewer than three minutes each) to learn fun and critical info.



We've found YouTube Shorts are a cool way to communicate concise content that quickly communicates key messages. Of course, longer videos like we usually produce allow presenters

to dig much deeper, and we aren't slowing down on those. But quick videos allow editors to share products from the events we attend and help technical services specialists share crop culture best practices—because we know you're all busy.

Perhaps a blessing to some and a curse to others who tend to get lost in hours of scrolling, we've found the mobile-friendly format of Shorts benefits from the good old YouTube algorithm, attracting both existing and new viewers, which helps get our info out to more and more industry pros. Shorts also sometimes complement the longer-form videos I mentioned above, so look for links to full videos in the descriptions.

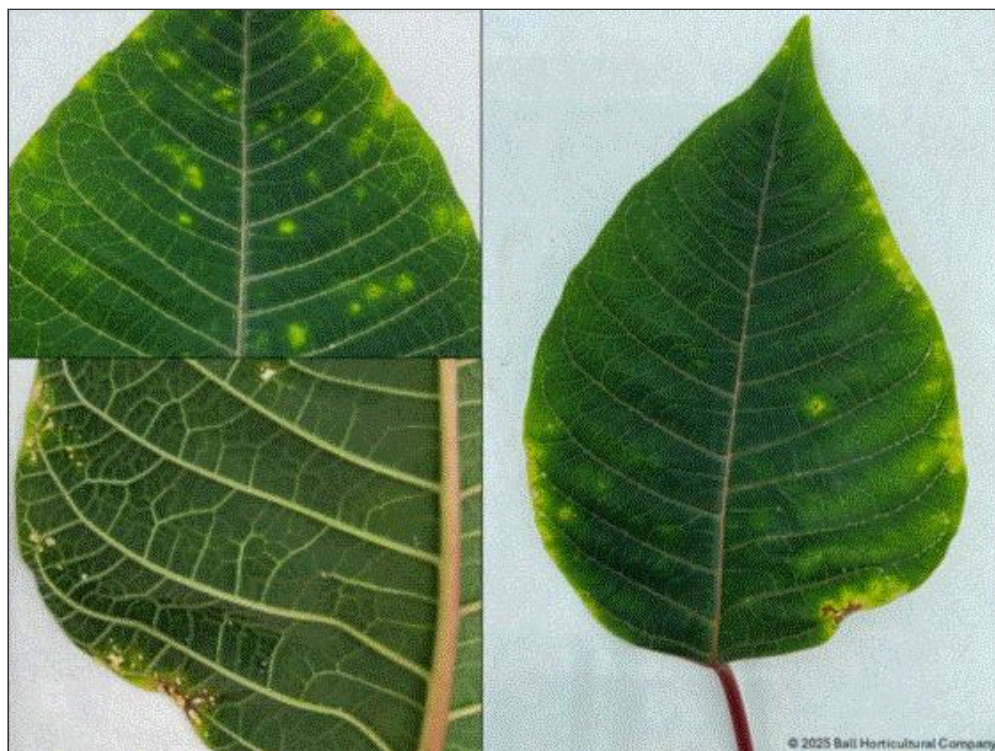
Here are direct links to the Shorts playlists from [GrowerTalks](#) and [Ball Seed](#).



Nick's Tip(s) of the Week: Poinsettia Leaf Spot Pathogen Or ...?

Each week, I'll work with my buddy Nick Flax, a technical services expert at Ball, to share a concern that's come up during one of his numerous calls with growers across North America. This week, he's been working with growers on an issue that usually arises later in production but seems to be hitting early this year.

PROBLEM: This week started off with a flurry of emails and calls from growers reporting spots that suddenly appeared on their poinsettias. Lesions with tannish colored centers, yellow margins in some cases, and random distribution across symptomatic leaves, all of which seem like early symptoms of *Alternaria*, anthracnose (scab), or *Xanthomonas* infection.



NICK'S TIP: After looking at similar photos from several growers, it seemed pretty clear that there was some sort of pathogen outbreak brewing. That was until our plant pathologists examined multiple specimens submitted by different growers... No bacterial streaming from the spots, no signs of fungal mycelia or fruiting bodies were found—just (drumroll please) ... crud!

Normally, I don't put the word out about this oddly named disorder until mid to late November, but apparently crud came early this year. If you've seen similar symptoms in your poinsettia crop recently, take note to ensure your poinsettias don't get cruddier.

What Is Crud?

"Crud" is a highly technical term for latex eruption that occurs when plant/water relations are out of whack. Excessive turgor pressure causes cell walls in leaves or bracts to burst, after which vascular fluid erupts out of the plant. This can occur when environmental and crop cultural factors combine to create excessive turgor, including when:

- growing media is overly wet going into the night,
- nighttime air temperatures are high,
- relative humidity is excessively high, and/or
- drastic weather changes spike or crash air temperature in the greenhouse.

Fertilizer salt accumulation in the growing media can also be a factor in the incidence and severity of latex eruption. As plants mature and overall growth begins to slow, roots will still take up excess fertilizer salts in the media. Additional salt uptake often forces roots to take up additional water to maintain osmotic balance, and this can further increase turgor.

Unfortunately, once latex eruption occurs, there is no way to undo the damage. Ruptured cells are completely compromised and will not recover, so this disorder can have a lasting impact on your crop's aesthetic. The good news is that this time of year, you still have time to push growth and cover up damaged foliage.

Incidence and severity of "crud" will vary from one operation to the next, but some varieties are more prone to this disorder than others. Since moisture management and temperature are the primary drivers for this disorder, occurrences are typically more severe in hot spots throughout your greenhouses, near side vents, breezeways, doors, or areas with poorer air flow. As such, it's best to focus on prevention:

- Allow moderate dry-down between waterings. On the 1–5 moisture scale (1 = air dry; 5 = saturated), avoid watering above a level 4 and only dry down to a level 2.
- Increase airflow and air exchanges (when possible) during the daytime to help drive transpiration and shorten dry-down time after you water or fertigate.
- Avoid late afternoon or evening irrigations unless plants are dangerously dry and at risk of wilting.

Sooty mold and other opportunistic organisms may start to grow on the nutrient-rich vascular fluid if it accumulates on the leaf surface, but they won't ultimately hurt the plants. However, if moderate to severe damage occurs due to latex eruption, compromised tissue can provide an entry point for pathogens like *Botrytis*. It's best to apply a broad-spectrum foliar fungicide out of an abundance of caution.



e-GRO on Late-Season Poinsettia Problems

Just as I was wrapping up this week's newsletter, I received an e-GRO Alert that's important to get into this issue.

Dr. Brian Whipker, Patrick Veazie and Luke Finn at NC State collaborated on **THIS ALERT** that focused on issues growers often encounter in the final weeks of poinsettia production—root diseases like *Pythium*, whiteflies, magnesium (Mg) deficiency and bract edge burn.

Each of these challenges is different, with different causes, but any of them can add major stress to poinsettia crops *and the growers responsible for them*. We all know poinsettia losses drastically impact profitability so the e-GRO team's explanation of each issue and best practices to avoid or manage them is super critical. This is definitely a document to pass on to your entire poinsettia production crew: **PREVENTING LATE-SEASON POINSETTIA PROBLEMS**.

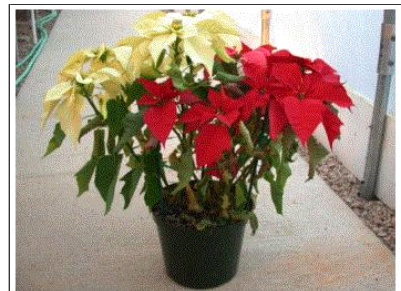


Figure 3. Plants impacted by *Pythium* will often exhibit wilting whenever the pot is saturated due to a lack of roots for proper water uptake. (© Brian Whipker)



Notes from the International Plant Trialing Conference: Best Practices

Earlier this week, I had the opportunity to attend this year's **International Plant Trialing Conference** organized by the **All-America Selections** team, and held for the first time since 2015. It was well worth the decade-long wait, and based on feedback from attendees, I highly doubt it will be 10 years until the next one.



More than 150 industry members involved in plant trialing were at the meeting in Minneapolis—including trial managers representing trial grounds for commercial growers, breeding companies, botanic gardens, universities, data-collection software reps and more. The diversity of attendees and presenters covered a lot of job functions and trial objectives, but what really struck me was how much each type of trial had in common with the others.

I took a LOT of notes during each of the 15 panel sessions I sat in on, and because I was smart and used my iPad, creating newsletter content from the sessions is pretty quick. I'll share a couple each week for the next few newsletters.

Starting with ... **Best practices from AAS judges and trial managers**, including Richard Hawke (Chicago Botanic Garden), Jessie Liebguth (Iowa State University), Penny Merritt-Price (Young's Plant Farm), Denise Mullins (Smith Gardens) and Kristen Noble (Harris Seeds).

Successful plant trials don't happen by accident. They're the result of careful planning, consistent execution and clear communication. Whether your goal is to evaluate new genetics, support R&D or inspire confidence at retail, a well-structured trial delivers data—and stories—that matter.

Plan with purpose. Start by defining your objectives (*this was a common theme throughout the conference*). What problem are you trying to solve and who are you communicating with? Write out a hypothesis and determine which methods, plant forms and data points will best answer your question.

Think about perception—how do you want your trials to be seen by stakeholders? Factor in budget restrictions, product sourcing and the value your trial offers (especially if you charge participants).

Scale it right. Your trial's size and scope should match your resources. Consider available space, manpower, duration and how many replications are needed for reliable results.

As discussed throughout the conference, different trial types often have different goals. Your own goals are sort of unique to your business, audience and objectives, but here are a few general thoughts from the panelists:

- Advanced or breeder trials require deep performance evaluation

- Production or R&D trials are usually culture and efficiency focused
- Public trials can be educational and promotional
- Anonymous trials offer unbiased comparison
- Retail or marketing trials can incorporate consumer-appeal testing
- Perennial trials are, of course, long-term, meaning 3-4 years

Some advice offered was to plan around product delivery dates, staff up for planting week and know your production timing and container requirements well in advance.

Funding & partnerships. If you charge breeders, clearly define what's being evaluated. For public trial gardens, funding might come through sponsorships, social media exposure or survey participation rather than direct fees.

Execute with consistency. Use software tools (more on this in next week's newsletter) that enable quick data collection, analysis and sharing. Keep measurement standards consistent—especially if multiple people or locations are involved.

For qualitative ratings, train evaluators on a common 1–5 scale to minimize bias. Include well-known comparison varieties and consider coded plots (blind trials) for greater objectivity.

A balanced approach. The “tough love vs. nurturing” discussion came up quite a bit throughout the sessions. Some prefer to let plants struggle for real-world insight; others maintain them in peak condition to showcase potential. Whatever your approach, document how you care for the plants so results can be accurately interpreted.

Capture the story with photos. Photography is one of your most powerful tools. Take photos from the same height and angle throughout the trial—consider weekly pics for annuals and every other week for perennials. Adjust perspective for the crop, i.e. top-down for mums or poinsettias to show blooms/bracts, side views for annuals to show habit and size.

Organize your images by year, crop or trial, and use comparative photos to tell the full story.

More Notes from the IPTC: In-Ground vs. Container

As was on full display at the International Plant Trialing Conference this week, plant trials come in all shapes and sizes—and choosing between in-ground and container trials can significantly affect the results you get and the story you tell. The best programs understand the purpose behind each method and plan accordingly. This panel discussion featured David Roberts (Bailey Nurseries), Pam Bennett (The Ohio State University), Marcus Jansen (PanAmerican Seed) and Jonah Brown (Danziger).



Trial Goals and Resources Matter

Every trial begins with intent, and that intent can be unique or dependent on the role of the trial in the wider context of the industry. For example, university trials often showcase whatever the breeders want to send. Some trials focus on end use (the garden or landscape), and this might require both in-ground and container trials depending on regionality and/or conditions. Breeding companies often manage both internal and external trials, balancing research goals with grower, gardener and landscaper performance.

In many cases, the approach comes down to resources and facility capacity. Some locations run multiple trial sites—one might receive intensive care, while another simulates the “home gardener experience.” This diversity helps create a full picture of how plants will perform across different environments and conditions.

Planning and Planting for Consistency

Best practices often begin before the first plant hits the soil. Many presenters who have multiple trial sites felt plants should be started in one greenhouse so all their sites begin with uniform material. Once plants are ready and you know what survived, teams can map trial layouts and prepare tags and diagrams ahead of planting day.

One model—using volunteers to plant everything at once—was a great example of efficiency. Pre-planning with trial software also allows coordinators to easily navigate plots, capture data and ensure consistent organization across all reps and locations.

Trial managers should be part of the planning process early, confirming available space and priority varieties. A good idea shared was to always use two tags (one in the tray or pot and one in the field) to maintain accuracy and traceability.

Container vs. In-Ground: A Few Pros and Cons

Container Trials

Pros: Highly controllable, movable and less risky. Drip lines and uniform media allow precise evaluation.

Cons: Space limits replication, growth happens fast and results can sometimes feel less “real world” depending on the crop and future use.

In-Ground Trials

Pros: Larger scale, natural conditions and a true picture of landscape performance.

Cons: Flooding, disease pressure, deer, irrigation inconsistencies—even tailgating fans at universities—can make things unpredictable.

Both in-ground and container trials have major value to the industry. Containers offer control and comparability, especially with crops that traditionally are grown and sold in patio pots and combos. In-ground shows resilience, disease resistance and real-world performance—critical data for growers, retailers and landscapers.

Capturing and Sharing Results

Good data only tells part of the story—good photography completes it! Consistency is key and the panelists all spent time training trial garden staff or even offering a “trial photo boot camp.” Here are some of their tips:

- For in-ground trials, take photos of rows from above and at field level
- For containers, use shots from above and profile views from the side

Consider holding end-of-season discussions to interpret both quantitative ratings and qualitative observations. The final step is to organize images and reports so the entire team—and future trial managers—can easily access them.

Finish Line ... Stay Motivated!

Every year around this time, I like to include some end-of-season motivational ideas to help you keep attitudes positive within your team. Mums are shipping out, poinsettias are in the final stages, perennials are being put to bed, and as the weather cools down in many regions and sunlight becomes sparse, attitudes can wilt like a patio pot in August.

I went in search of some concise tips for boosting morale and found a blog post from *Harvard Business Review*. Putting the tips into horticulture-speak, here are some ideas.

This time of year, strong leadership matters more than ever. Here’s how to keep your crew engaged and excited, even when things seem gloomy:

Be open and honest. As the busy season winds down, talk openly with your team about what went well, what was challenging and what the upcoming spring season looks like. Honest conversations about workloads, goals and improvements needed show that you value their perspective.

Find new ways to motivate. If raises or bonuses aren’t possible, ask your employees what keeps them inspired. Maybe it’s learning new techniques, taking charge of a new crop or having input on trials.

Stay connected. Regular check-ins, even quick chats during morning walk-throughs, help team members feel valued. Listen, offer feedback and celebrate small wins—like nailing a new crop, improving quality or positive feedback from a wholesale customer.

Protect against burnout. Long hours and stress can wear down morale. This topic actually came up quite a bit during the plant trialing conference I was at this week ... so encourage breaks, rotate demanding tasks and show empathy when workloads peak. Foster collaboration on teams to build camaraderie.

Great leaders grow great teams—and even after hard seasons, a little care and connection can make your greenhouse an even better place to work.

Until next week ... enjoy the fall weather, football, baseball playoffs, pumpkin spice lattes, or whatever else you get into this time of year!

Please feel free to send your comments, constructive criticism and topic ideas to me at bcalkins@ballhort.com.



Bill Calkins

Editor - Tech On Demand

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