

GROWERTALKS

Columns

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How Screaming Plant Lust and Desperation Changed Our Production

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I generally dislike bare root liners because they require extra steps and handling. For most of our production, we prefill pots in each house, lay the plugs on top, dibble and plant. With very few exceptions, we can't dibble bare roots—we pot them on wagons beside the house and walk them inside. It's much more labor intensive per pot, and since we're also an orchard, we store apples in our cooler all winter, which makes that first bare root shipment in spring ... exciting.

With over 95% of our perennials planted from plugs, bare roots throw a curve ball into normal production. But we've always grown certain crops that way, including *Dicentra spectabilis*. We fall-planted bare root dicentra as early as our vendors could ship them—usually week 39—but we couldn't get them rooted out enough to hit the March window even though the tops looked good.

Then one year I had a case of screaming plant lust for the gold-leafed beauty *Dicentra Gold Heart*, but couldn't find it as a bare root. Against the advice of the sales rep, we brought in 72-cell plugs in early August, gingerly planted them and crossed our fingers. The rep was right; they were brittle and slow and didn't look like much, but they rooted wonderfully in late summer and blew out in the spring.

We sold every Gold Heart that year before we could even turn on the other *spectabilis* cultivars and we finally met the early spring demand. It took several years to move our other *spectabilis* production to plugs because there weren't very many vendors, but a vendor who heard me wax poetic about *spectabilis* from plugs suggested I try astilbe. We'd long had the same issues with astilbe—spring-planted bare roots finished too late and fall-planted didn't root quickly enough to sell as “breaking” to the early market. Again, August-planted plugs were the ticket to the March market.

There's a balance to these things though and I must have upset that balance because just as I rejoiced in fewer bare roots, a new plant-savvy broker suggested we try coreopsis ... from bare root. Coreopsis on the whole are pretty straightforward. Plant, pinch, PGR and hope they sell (especially in the short days of spring) before they resemble mushroom clouds. Coreopsis Moonbeam never fit that model for me though. Open and airy can be nice qualities in perennials like gaura or bouteloua, but that's not what customers expect in coreopsis.

Overwintered Moonbeam were great—full, dense tops with great roots, but spring and summer plantings from plugs required multiple pinches for branching and high rates of Paclobutrazol to (try to) keep internodes short. It was a constant struggle and we could still only turn on a portion of the crop each week. Out of desperation, we trialed Moonbeam week 16 from bare root. Six weeks later— six weeks—I couldn't believe my eyes. Full tops and well rooted! Planting a bare root in late spring is essentially planting someone else's overwintered plant. Dope slap to the back of my own head. How could I not have recognized that earlier?! That was the day I started seeing bare roots as problem solvers.

With that new (to me) info, I started gunning for other problem children. An overwintered upright sedum is a beautiful thing, but requires some faith as plugs planted in fall often look like a sedum version of the Charlie Brown Christmas tree. In spring, that ugly duckling turns into a beautiful beach ball of succulent shoots. I'm amazed by it every year. Unfortunately for us, spring plantings of plugs for early summer sales don't fare quite as well. They're not as full, they don't branch well and we lose some to bacterial stem rot. Bare root liners gave me the habit of an overwintered plant, but with much less time on the ground. Heliopsis Tuscan Sun was another similar success story.

It hasn't worked for everything—we still struggle with summer-planted perovskia whether from plugs or roots and I can't grow iberis well from either. But as we struggle with specific crops, I'm often looking to see if there's a different liner type available. Now if I could just find bare root echinacea ... **GT**

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