

GROWERTALKS

Columns

2/26/2015

Young Biological Horticulturists

Roger McGaughey



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According to our illustrious editor Chris Beytes in [his January article](#), seeing the word “horticulturist” in a headline excites him to no end, so Chris, this one is for you.

Spring is almost here and we’re making plans for another, even better, biological growing season. In previous articles, I’ve mentioned that our production of aphid banker plants needs to be improved. One of the biggest challenges with this crop is preventing early parasitization of the young cherry aphids while a large population is being produced. We still had a good supply of *Aphidius* in our houses in early November last year, which was fantastic, so I knew we were going to have even more difficulties than in the past. Banker cages and hairnets have been successful, but this season we’re going in a completely different

direction—off site.

Last fall, I spoke with Jaap, my boss, about the possibility of involving some school students in a horticultural project, learning how to grow aphid banker plants and being our suppliers. It just so happened that one of his valley friends, Kurt, was a schoolteacher. So contact was made and Kurt thought it would be a great spring semester project for his landscape students. He and his class came to Pioneer Gardens for a tour through the nursery and I outlined the basics of the task ahead. They left with some educational literature and a feel for the greenhouse and a commitment that, with some coaching along the way, they would be happy to grow the plants that we needed.

In early January, my young assistant, Amanda, and I visited Kurt and his associate, Mark, at Franklin County Technical School in Turners Falls to check out their facilities. We brought a supply of pots, potting mix, cereal seed, some RootShield Plus WP, slow-release fertilizer and a few pots of already germinated seedlings. We viewed their germination chamber complete with grow lights and the bench area in their workshop that was being constructed with HID lamps where our banker plants would be grown. We were impressed with the setup and their desire to make the process an educational project. Amanda demonstrated the pot filling, seeding and RootShield application process to the students. I emphasized the need to do their homework and read the literature that they’d been given in order to understand the biology of banker plant production.

Their goal was to provide us with 10 banker plants each week starting in early March. The students are only at school five days a week and they needed to figure out the timing of the seed germination process so that aphids can be introduced to the new pots as the seedlings are just breaking through the soil surface.

The following week we took an aphid banker plant to them that we received from BioBest. We also brought some of our seeded pots with us so that we could compare our germination stage with what they'd managed to produce. Theirs, unfortunately, were too tall, but this made them more aware of how fast things can happen and the need to get their timing right. A lesson on aphid introduction into our pots was provided by Amanda and we departed with the promise to return in a week to bring another banker plant and see how well they would proceed with their new aphid crop.

On our next weekly visit we were impressed with the enthusiasm that greeted us and found that one student, Emily, had stepped up and wanted to be the leader of the project. They showed us the record-keeping chart that they'd created and the construction progress that had been made. The watering of last week's banker left a little to be desired, but all wasn't lost. I tried to emphasize that planting a rockwool cube into a peat/perlite mix needs more regular water applications than they'd given it to aid in its establishment. With the five-day school schedule, timing and attention to detail are again good lessons learned.

At the time of writing this article, I have every confidence that the student/teacher growers will be successful. With Amanda's continued monitoring and checking in with her new friend Emily, they will time their germination correctly, produce good quality plants and supply us with our weekly requirement of heavily aphid-infested banker plants. The future young biological horticulturists are raring to go and will have fun learning along the way. **GT**

Roger McGaughey, head grower at Pioneer Gardens in Deerfield, Massachusetts, was educated in Northern Ireland and England and has 40 years experience as a grower.