GROWERTALKS

Columns

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Winds of Change

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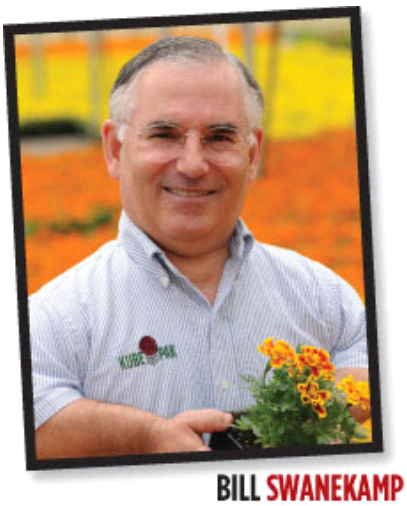

It may have slipped your notice that on September 10, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit in San Francisco ruled against Dow AgroSciences and its sales of pesticides that contain sulfoxaflor, a chemical that's considered a subclass of neonicotinoids. The 9th Court ruled that the EPA hadn't fully and thoroughly investigated the pesticides risk to honey bees. The article, from Reuters.com written by Carey Gillam, goes on to say, "In vacating the EPA approval, the court said that 'given the precariousness of bee populations, leaving the EPA's registration of sulfoxaflor in place risks more potential environmental harm than vacating it.'"

Now we know that the class of pesticides known as neonicotinoids are much safer to humans than compared to older formulations of pesticides, but the Court didn't even take that into consideration when making its ruling. It focused its attention solely on the environmental impact on honey bees. Does that seem a little odd to you? It does to me. Yes, we want to use the safest pesticides possible for creatures large and small, but why is the human element considered so lightly? Study after study has shown that the decline in the bee population cannot be attributed to one thing, such as neonicotinoids. (See http://tinyurl.com/Swanekampbeestudy)

Yet the court still ruled against a pesticide class that's been very effective in controlling pests that we fight on a daily basis in our greenhouses. What's next?

An October issue of Jen White's *GreenTalks* e-newsletter mentioned that the Montgomery County Council of Maryland passed laws restricting the use of certain pesticides used on lawns and playgrounds. Although, there's little science backing up this action as providing much protection to humans, the Council still went ahead and approved the law.

What does this mean for us? We're entering a period of time where we'll see the continued restriction of the pesticides we regularly use. They're being eliminated from our shrinking toolbox. Where will this leave us? Good question!

Back in September, we attended a conference sponsored by AmericanHort in Pittsburgh that focused on the use of beneficial insects and biological controls in the greenhouse. About 150 people attended this conference. Many of the leading researchers in our industry were present and gave outstanding talks and presentations. Sadly, very few growers attended the program. Although, I didn't get a complete count, I found that less than five of the top 100 growers in our industry attended the seminar.

I was invited to give two presentations at the conference—one on "Real World Examples" of using beneficial insects and the other on the cost of using biological controls. One point that was stressed in the "Real World Examples" talk was how effective the use of biological controls has been in our greenhouse. We're now in our third year of successful insect control through biological controls. This spring, we saw excellent control of thrips on calibrachoa hanging baskets and planters. We were able to eliminate all wet sprays for insect control in the greenhouse. We employed the use of cold foggers applying Botanigard on a weekly basis and saw outstanding results. Another benefit of this approach was to our employees; they benefited because Botanigard is very safe for humans.

Often, other growers ask if the use of biocontrols is cost effective. I always give the example of what happened in the spring of 2013. We'd been drenching with a systemic pesticide and wet spraying our hanging baskets for many years. Over the past eight years, we saw a decreasing benefit from the wet sprays. Finally, in 2013, the thrips population was out of control. It didn't matter what chemical we used—the thrips seemed impervious to the pesticides. That spring we threw away 10,000 10-in. hanging baskets at a cost of $10.00 per basket.

I'm sure you can do the math in your head, but that cost us $100,000. Spring forward two years. We haven't dumped a 10-in. hanging basket of calibrachoa in two years due to thrips damage.

How much has this saved us? $200,000. What did it cost us to implement this biological program? About $60,000 per year. Only about one-third of that can be attributed to the spring hanging basket program. Not a bad investment—put in $20,000 and reap $100,000. That's a return I'll take any day.

The winds of change are blowing in our industry as far as the use of pesticides and it's time we as an industry start paying more attention to this very effective and superior way to control pests. **GT**

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