

GROWERTALKS

Columns

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“Growers Will Cost You Money”

Chris Fifo

Last week, I heard a manager of a very successful nursery and garden center say, when asked how many growers he had, “Growers will cost you money.”

Really? Growers? Try teenage boys! My son, who just entered high school, loves playing basketball. With the season just beginning, he needs a new pair of shoes. But we can't get just any pair of shoes. Noooo! “Everyone” is going to have those shoes from our local athletic store. (He thinks) he has to have customized Nike Hyperdunk something or another shoes for \$200! Yeah, right!

Growers will cost you money in many ways, but managers will get a return on their investment (ROI).

From a grower's perspective, we want the crops in our care to be the best they can be, not just “saleable.” That's what we love doing. It's our passion. It's our job. And yes, it's going to cost you money.

Dehumidification—This may be the biggest area where growers will cost you money and I understand the managers' concern. When he walks into the plug house on a cold November day and the roof vent is open a foot, all he sees is dollar signs floating up and out.

The grower, on the other hand, knows the ROI for lowering his humidity. Plants can't “breathe” with high humidity. This then leads to soft plants, poor growth and often a longer time to finish.

We'll do everything we can to manage our humidity—from watering only as necessary early in the day, being aware of how much water is going on the floor, and watching the weather to schedule feeding and other crop treatments for sunny days. But we still have to heat and purge. How much often depends on fuel prices (and if the managers are around!).

Lowering humidity gives us a more toned and higher-quality crop and, therefore, a more valuable crop. It also contributes to less shrinkage and a greater ROI.

Pest management—Of course, we want our crops to be pest free. Diseased plants directly affect the bottom line, often exasperated by higher humidity. So we're going to spray. We're going to drench. We're going to dehumidify. We're going to cost you money. But you'll have more plants to sell.

Insect pests are a different story. It's difficult to put an ROI on battling the bugs. If our customers are putting our plants outside, we may have a higher tolerance than if they're staying inside. And if they're going to another greenhouse, the tolerance is even lower.

Insecticides are expensive, so we spend our time scouting and spraying only when we need to (leaving a trail of those dollar signs in our footprints). We also spend our time researching and implementing the latest management strategies, such as biocontrols.

Sometimes it's obvious when we have to spray. You can't sell plants covered with aphids or poinsettias with a cloud of whiteflies, but what about thrips? Sure, they cause damage in higher numbers, but what about their potential to spread viruses like INSV? For this reason, we'll continually battle thrips. Consider it an insurance policy—either way it's going to cost you money.

Lighting—In the dead of winter it can be challenging to grow high-quality crops. HPS lighting has long helped us grow better crops during the lowest light levels of the year. Growers will cost you money when they turn them on and, depending on how many are in use, we can really make the electric meter spin and throw off those dollar signs!

These days, the meter may spin a bit slower with LED lighting. I've done some trials and LEDs can provide comparable growth to HPS. However, I would spend nearly \$100,000 to convert my plug range to LED lighting and give you a 10-year ROI. I don't think I'll hit you up for that just yet.

So yes, it's true that growers will cost you money, but we do it to make you money. Sometimes it may not seem like it, but our goal is to give you a good return on your investment.

Who knows—maybe someday I'll get a return on those basketball shoes. **GT**

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