

GROWERTALKS

Columns

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Mistaken? Probably ...

Sylvia Schaap

I'm banking on the assumption whoever read my column in the December issue caught it. And I'm not talking about the flu. My dad caught it while sitting down to coffee with a fellow grower, just skimming through my article and chatting at the same time.

As soon as he read the sentence out loud I smacked myself on my forehead, hard. Seriously, Sylvia? How in the world could you make such a dumb mistake?

I couldn't blame it on a typo, a slip of the finger. You see, I wrote and I quote, "Applying urea can cause your dirt pH to go up."

UP! Up? No, DOWN! The acidity goes UP, the pH goes DOWN. When I told my younger sister, her Grade 11 Chemistry knowledge could explain it. I was thoroughly humbled; after two grueling university chemistry courses, two courses on soil, plus several papers and presentations on the topic, I managed to get it all wrong in a grower's magazine article.

One good thing: I will probably never mix that fact up again.

After all, if I never made any mistakes, I would never remember and learn. They say experience is the best teacher. Well, experiencing that red-faced, toe-scuffing feeling teaches like no textbook can!

I happen to be quite the expert at being sheepish and red-faced.

Take, for example, mistakes I've made at school. For our fruit crops class last semester, we had to create one of those big scientific posters and present it to our professor and one of his graduate students individually. The study I chose to analyze was on the effect of different foliar nutrition products on peach fruit quality parameters. It had tables upon tables of numbers—all good and useful results—but useless on a poster. So I took to Microsoft Excel, entered all the data and popped up some bar graphs so it would be easier to see what was going on. Being the results, those graphs were the prominent feature on that poster.

I presented to the grad student first. After my spiel, he rubbed his beard and began to point out the good things he could find on my poster—which worried me because he hadn't asked if I wanted the good news or

the bad news first. He was starting right off with the good, meaning bad news was bound to follow.

He chose his words carefully. “Do you know what’s wrong with your graphs?”

I think he was hoping I would know, and that I could give him excuses and a solution.

But I didn’t.

And as hard as I looked I couldn’t find what he was seeing.

Once he pointed it out, I could’ve smacked myself on the forehead, hard, but that was hardly professional. It was a silly mistake, one that was easily fixed, if the graphs weren’t printed on a poster bigger than me. If the mistake hadn’t already been caught. And if the professor wasn’t headed my way for his turn listening to my spiel.

Before beginning my presentation I showed him what was wrong with my graphs and explained what they should have looked like. He accepted my mistake without much of a question, but the rest of my speech was slightly more flustered than they usually are. I was still happy with my grade, but I learned that graphs are sneaky and must be checked and rechecked to make sure no blatant errors are hiding behind the scholarly looking gridlines.

Oh, the mistakes I’ve made! Almost killing the spray tank with the old Case tractor, busting up my fingers with the rototiller, forgetting to turn a leaky hose off overnight and nearly sinking away in the production bed-turned-swamp in the morning.

I’ve learned lessons the hard, painful way. Once, while working in a bee yard with my dad, I was over-confident about my strength and I picked up a box full of bees only to find it was a little too heavy. I dropped ’er down with a thunk on the pallet and was instantly wearing dozens of angry bees, stinging me through my jeans.

I’ve learned lessons the costly way—calculation mistakes on exams, experimental errors in chemistry (KABOOM! Just kidding ...), letting a field of potted spruce trees go dry, hitting my brother square in the face with a snowball ... you name it and I’ve probably made that mistake.

I asked my younger sister if she had any more examples of me making mistakes. Her response: “Hmm, let me think. This shouldn’t be too difficult!”

Luckily, I’ve also learned from mistakes the indirect way; turns out I’m not the only one who has a moment, a slip of the mind, made a wrong assumption or a bad decision.

Mistakes, although they’re penalized with a poor grade in school and met with displeasure in the workforce, are important in the development of skill and knowledge. If I’ve learned from the mistake, I’ll never make the same mistake again (hopefully). If I haven’t learned my lesson the first time, that mistake will come around again to shake me to my senses.

Besides, everyone makes them so something good has to be said about them, right?

I apologize for my mistake, but I've learned my lesson. From now, on my dad is reading any technical articles before they show up in a magazine. **GT**

Sylvia Schaap is a fourth-year horticulture/agriculture student at the University of Guelph in Ontario, Canada. She also occasionally works in the family greenhouse while looking at plant diseases under the microscope, writing papers on breeding grapes, making posters on the effect of silicon on fruit production and quality, and calculating crop irrigation requirements.