

GROWERTALKS

Acres & Acres

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How Growing is Like School

Chris Beytes



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“Let me tell you a story about Len Busch of Len Busch Roses. He spoke to my class when I was a wee one back in 1976 at the University of Minnesota. He said, ‘You know, growing is like going to school ...’”

So concluded last month’s installment of what I jokingly call “Snatch the Pebbles from Will Healy’s Hand.” Will, Ball’s chief technical guru, has been schooling us all on the exact meaning of his mantra “Plant for profit, plant to plan,” something he’s long been preaching. (Refer back to my February, March and April columns for the full lesson. It’s deep stuff, but eminently practical!)

Last month, Will taught us how 25 dead plants actually costs you the profits from 100 plants. I proposed to Will that the only solution is to not kill plants—to be 100% perfect in your growing. “And nobody is that good,” I proclaimed.

“Actually, it’s a great opportunity to get those 25 plants to survive,” he corrected. “It’s not that complicated. People do it every day.”

He then leaned back with his hands behind his head, his story-telling position.

“Let me tell you a story about Len Busch of Len Busch Roses. He spoke to my class when I was a wee one back in 1976 at the University of Minnesota. He said, ‘You know, growing is like going to school. If you do 90% of the class work 90% of the time, 90% of the time on time, your grade will average out to ...?’”

Even I could do that math.

“Ninety percent,” I answered.

“And at 90% you get an ...?”

“An A!”

“Very good!” Will said, pleased with my ready grasp of the subject. “Now, write this down because you’re going to need to do some math. If you do 90% of the tasks 50% of the time and only 60% of the time on time ... let’s add that up ... that’s 200%, divided by 3 ... that’s 66.6%. And at 66%, what grade do you get?”

“A D. Or C-minus if your teacher is feeling generous.”

“You’ve got it! So, to be an A student—or an A grower—you don’t have to do 100% of the tasks 100% of the time and do them all 100% on time. Because you’re right, nobody is that good. What you have to do is figure out what you must do to be successful with that crop, and when you must do it, and then get your tail out there and do it!”

This makes sense. As a grower, you have many tasks that have to happen at a certain time on each crop. The window of time may be just a few hours (such as sticking cuttings or watering plugs) or within a day or two (such as applying PGRs) or within a few days (such as spacing or pinching). Time-critical tasks are those which, if you don’t do them on time, will drastically impact the salability of your crop.

Early on in this series, Will and I discussed “KPIs”—Key Performance Indicators. In this case, your KPI for each crop is a prioritized list of each critical activity that crop requires, in order of importance, so the critical jobs are done first, and the less-critical jobs are the ones that can be delayed if necessary.

“Every grower knows today what they coulda/shoulda/woulda done five weeks ago,” says Will. “You want to make sure you have your KPI in writing so you know what didn’t get done that shoulda gotten done. This task, on time, every time—or 90% of the time. Or even if you do 90% of the tasks 80% of the time and 80% of the time on time, you still get a B, meaning you’re still ahead of most growers in the world.”

Will summed it up: “Growing is not that tough. Getting it done is tough. So ask yourself or your grower, ‘What is keeping you from doing the tasks that you need to do, on time, all the time? What is preventing you from converting 1,000 plants into 1,000 saleable units?’”

Sounds like a plan! Thanks, Will, for the lesson. **GT**