GROWERTALKS

Acres & Acres

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I Hated Math, Too

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Our cover story by Dr. Charlie Hall is proof that we should have paid more attention to math in school. Math is important to every industry, ours included. As I've long preached, "You don't make money growing plants, you make money SELLING plants." But even then, you only make money if you sell plants at a profitable price and that's what Charlie is helping you calculate.

If you skipped the article because numbers aren't your thing, trust me, I feel your pain. But I encourage you to give it another go anyway. Tear it out, read it in bed, take it slow, write down the numbers on a pad and work through them until it sinks through the concrete because knowing these pricing details are the only way you're going to stay in business these days. And I say this as someone who's struggled with math my whole life.

Actually, my main problem wasn't math, but math teachers—they didn't make it practical to me. If I'd been interested in the outcome of the problems they presented me with, I might have been more interested in learning how to manipulate the numbers to get the answer. As it was, math was a nebulous, non-relevant thing—especially algebra, when I was asked to add letters and numbers together. 1x + 1y = 2x? Huh? Well, being a smart-aleck, and truly not understanding the concept, I guessed that x = 24 and y = 25 because they are the second and third from the end of the alphabet. Then the teacher got into the order in which you did the sums, and I blanked out on the whole concept and started doodling in my notebook.

Then there are the painful memories of my dad trying to teach the 10-year-old me math while on vacation. Now, keep in mind, pop was an MIT-educated mechanical engineer who designed jet engines for a living and once taught college math. Me, I was a left-handed/right-brained, daydreaming artist and musician who just wanted to be left alone to gaze out the back window of the Country Sedan as we drove north from Florida to New England.

Here's the scene: We'd stop for gas, dad would pump, I'd buy a Nehi Grape from the machine and settle into the way-back (little brother Phil got the middle). Then dad would climb back into the driver's seat, consult the odometer and holler back at me out of the blue, "Christopher! We've driven 243 miles and I just put in 20.7 gallons of gas. What kind of mileage are we getting?"*

Well, for Pete's sake, how should I know? The idea of doing long division in my head was as foreign to me as speaking French. My usual answer was to whine, "Ahh, dad, I'm on vacation!" And he'd grunt something about what a disappointment I was and work it out in his own head, and I'd go back to my daydreaming.

I actually can do math as needed for my job and life. I'm all the time calculating percentages. I can do hectares to acres no problem (divide by 2.4). I read P&Ls and oversee a seven-figure budget and actually enjoy seeing the numbers add up. I've even gotten slightly hooked on a YouTube channel called Numberphile, which explains special numbers and problems and theorems in a way that's entertaining even to this non-numbers person. I figure it's never too late to learn.

Nor is it for you. Especially if it's critical to the future of your business. Also, know that Charlie's lesson is not just for growers selling to big boxes under Pay By Scan or who are funding merchandising programs. It's a principle of accounting for the cost of shrink that applies to every horticultural business, from breeder to retailer, in-store or online.

So break out the calculator. Shake off the haunting memories of math classes of yore. Learn it and put it to work. **GT**