

GROWERTALKS

Features

8/1/2019

Getting Woodyes Off to a Good Start

Shane Brockshus

If there are two core production truths I've learned in my time at Bailey Nurseries, they're these:

1. The value of a quality production program—to the customer and the business—exists only when we're able to deliver consistently; and
2. Success throughout the life cycle of any crop is dependent on starting with the right liner, more than any other factor.

Of course, there are many variables to consider when selecting the right liner for a program. Growing location, desired finished size and quality, sales target windows, labor management, facilities, capacities, weather, specific plant requirements ... the list goes on. Ultimately, our goal as growers must be minimizing risk, recognizing constraints and understanding costs while producing consistently.

At Bailey, we partner with a diverse mix of growers across North America and Europe. We believe in collaboration that elevates product quality across the board, and combined with the growing locations we have throughout the country, we gain insight into how to best produce woody ornamental crops in various climates. We want to share our experience with growers for success out of the gate with woody liners for those who are looking to get into woody ornamental production or for those who're always looking to accelerate their current operation.

Minimize time on the ground where possible. We're in a high-risk industry, dealing with perishable goods. The importance of turning inventory frequently, leading to efficient use of land and infrastructure, are rightfully getting more and more emphasis. The right choice in liners has a major impact here. Transitioning programs from smaller greenhouse plugs and rooted cuttings to Jumpstart potted liners has allowed us to shorten our time on the container ground. Ultimately, we'll use tissue culture, rooted cuttings, 38-cell plugs, Jumpstarts, bareroot liners or a combination of these to hit windows of target availability throughout the year.



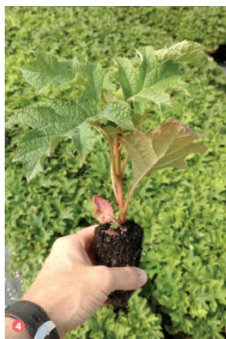
Figure 1. A freshly pruned crop of Summer Crush Hydrangea Jumpstarts that are being staged for fall sales and internal production.

Figure 2. Fresh crop of 2-gal. Summer Crush Hydrangea.

Understand your target windows. This is easier for some than others in our industry, but choosing the right liner has to start with when we expect to sell the product and walking it back from there. Figure 2 is an example of a crop of 2-gal. Endless Summer Summer Crush Hydrangea, spring-planted using Jumpstart liners at our Oregon operation that's just coming onto availability for summer and fall sales. In the greenhouse, our next batch of Jumpstarts is growing to be sold and to be planted into 2-gal. this fall to hit our spring sales window.

Recognize and respect your latitude if you're growing outdoors. Too often people fall into the trap of planting woody liners based on the calendar; we can attest from crazy Midwest weather the last two springs that all (fill in your typical early planting months) aren't the same. Going out into the elements too early when temperatures or conditions aren't good for growing can be disastrous. Sometimes the plant is best left in the greenhouse or cooler until Mother Nature cooperates.

Also, all regions are different. An example in our nursery is production of 2-gal. hibiscus varieties. In Onarga, Illinois, where we get steady heat and humidity, a bareroot liner from our fields performs best. In Yamhill, Oregon, where the early season sunny days and heat are less reliable, bareroot was too inconsistent.



We then used a greenhouse plug liner and manipulated plants by growing under poly houses to force heat and try to speed up finish times. Now we're growing a better crop in less time on the ground by starting with a Jumpstart, with no need to grow under plastic. Proper liner selection has both simplified and improved the crop cycle.

Another example of regional variance is our First Editions Jetstream Hydrangea quercifolia. We start out of tissue culture and grow on as a 38-cell greenhouse plug in Oregon. While we internally prefer an older, bulkier Jumpstart to feed our 3-gal. production, some growers in the South prefer planting the smaller, younger plug for their climate.

Figure 3. Two-gallon First Editions Fiji Hibiscus being grown to salable from a Jumpstart liner. • Figure 4. Jetstream Hydrangea 38-cell plug. • Figure 5. First Editions Gardenia Sweet Tea Jumpstart liner.

Look to level out labor as much as possible by using all the tools at your disposal. There isn't time to plant everything in spring and one way to manage labor challenges is to mold cycles to keep head counts more stable throughout the year, rather than full of peaks and valleys. Identify which varieties and liners lend themselves to planting in the fall or summer to level the labor, as well as narrow the time from plant to ship.

Simplify processes as well using these tools. Our 3-gal. lagerstroemia production started out by trying to plant multiple liners into the pot—we now focus on growing one good Jumpstart to feed each container. We've had more reliable yields and a better finished product. It also simplified the program from propagation to planting.

At Bailey, we've emphasized growing the right liner—even when that takes more time in the greenhouse or the field—to reduce not just time in the container, but also complexities, such as the need to grow under special conditions and multiple handling of a plant.

As you grow your crops, utilize your resources. Local researchers, vendors and especially your liner supplier should all be able to provide expertise with the details of growing on liners. Don't undervalue the importance of hydration before and at planting time, as well as caring for different varieties by their specific water needs. It can be easily forgotten in the busy nursery setting that all plants don't want the same water regimen.

We should always be learning and improving as growers. Whether a herbicide program, fertility, use of growth regulators, pruning practices or any other cultural practices related to plant performance, our philosophy is generally to walk before running while paying attention to details. Start with trials, and leave control "checks" to learn from and to rule things out if there's an issue.

Look at your entire production schedule holistically. Each program cannot be looked at in a vacuum. Being both efficient and effective with the nursery means planning the crop cycles with the whole year in mind, as they all inter-relate. The ultimate goal is to flow through the crops throughout the nursery year in terms of high yields, product hitting customer demands, all while balancing labor requirements.

Nursery production requires attention to a thousand details and is affected by many variables and presents the grower plenty of risks. Planning ahead and starting out with the best liner to fit the program is the No. 1 thing we can do to help put the odds in our favor. **GT**

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