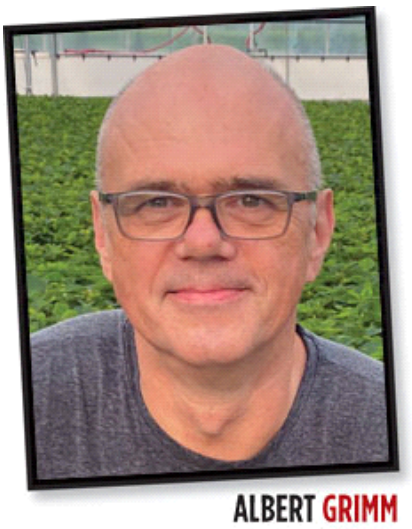
GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Production

10/1/2020

When Things Go Off the Rails

Albert Grimm



Well, we find ourselves in tough times again, and yet, for veterans of this industry, it should feel like business as usual. Existential crises have a familiar ring of routine after 40 years in the greenhouse. I've been through so much greenhouse doom-and-gloom that I've learned to build my life around uncertainty. It seems to be a job requirement in our line of work.

I had to find my first job during the stagflation, which followed the oil crisis of the 1970s. It was a time when career counselling was an outlandish concept. You had to build your career around any occupation that would pay a living. My dream of university was unattainable and I came to the world of greenhouse production without any expectation. This was just as well because it meant I had no expectations that could be crushed by reality. I discovered the hard way that greenhouse growing often feels like piloting a freight train, which has the tendency to derail at every curve in the track.

Within a few years, I watched the first industry-wide crop failure, as pesticide-resistant leafminer took out most chrysanthemum crops across the continent. It was my first opportunity to experience such a slow-motion train wreck and it did kickstart my interest in biological control.

Not much later, my first "real" job gave me authority over a large vegetable greenhouse. We promptly lost the entire tomato crop just as we started to harvest. A few months later, we lost the crop a second time. The culprit was herbicide-contaminated irrigation water, but I didn't know this at the time.

During those same years, we discovered a new method for producing pre-cooked, frozen dinners when the entire main heat pipe fell from the roof brackets and steamed two acres of English cucumbers on New Year's Eve. All the while we watched helplessly as a new pest by the name of western flower thrips moved into the greenhouse and consumed what was left of our crops.

At times, the anxiety caused by constant impending doom seemed overpowering. It was sheer bloody-mindedness that kept me going and it turned out to be precious education that I couldn't have found at any college. At the end of my two-year run with this company, I'd learned to manage irrigation water quality, become something of a boiler and heating system expert, and I was convinced that biological control was the only way to beat pesticide-resistant bugs.

Humans have an astonishing capacity for resilience, but most of us are never challenged to probe for it. Resilience isn't a priority in our comparatively protected modern lives. This may be a disadvantage because learning how to

draw on our resilience doesn't just give us the ability to absorb life's punches. Resilience teaches us the art of making the best of what we've got when we no longer can get what we want. It helps us focus on the small speck of light while we're still in the middle of the tunnel.

Some of our best opportunities grow from adversity and we cannot take advantage of them unless we develop the tenacity to succeed in times of crisis. This is just as true for people as it is for business. Forty years later, I'm still growing plants and I might not have been successful if I wouldn't have lived through times that presented seemingly insurmountable challenges for me.

When business is flying high, it's hard for individuals to make a difference, but if we manage to succeed in difficult times, everybody takes notice. As growers, we don't shine by doing everything right, but by preventing things from going wrong. Crisis situations allow us to show what we've learned.

So next time you're hit by a crisis or your job turns sour, instead of looking for a reset button, consider what Eleanor Roosevelt had to say: "People are like teabags. You can't tell how strong they are until you put them in hot water." **GT**

Albert Grimm is head grower for Jeffery's Greenhouses in St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada