

GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Production

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Uncertain Times

Roger McGaughey

It's probably an understatement to say that spring this year threw us all into a predicament that none of us expected. I was about to return to the greenhouse after my winter break when the pandemic hit, creating havoc for everyone. Pioneer Gardens, like many other greenhouses, went into consolidation mode.

Following discussions with owner Jaap Molenaar, we decided that it was best if I remained at home for the spring season with the goal of staying healthy and possibly returning to the greenhouse to do some consultancy work if and when conditions improved. Currently, following CDC guidelines, I visit the greenhouse occasionally on the weekends when there are limited staff members present.

As with many other greenhouse businesses, discussions revolved around how much production would have to be reduced and, consequently, how many staff might have to be laid off because of the COVID-19 situation. Would businesses survive if the economy went into free fall? Uncertainty led to a lot of very conservative decisions in many cases.

I was involved in the greenhouse business in the early 1970s during the oil crisis. At that time, the optimistic predictions for our industry were that there could be a 5% to 10% increase in demand due to people staying home because of the oil shortage and price increase. Would there be increased interest in gardening and, consequently, an increase in plant demand? That's exactly what actually happened then, but the conditions with the current pandemic were totally different.



Figure 1. Root structure from a mum at Fairview Farms. • Figure 2. The root structure of a mum right before shipping. • Figure 3. Roots of a perovskia after Configure applications.

As we all know now, after a very nervous and uncertain April, demand went through the roof in May and June, and most businesses sold out of product. Some of the early season cutbacks were maybe regretted, but better to sell

out and be short than have a lot of material to dump.

In my March article, I talked about some changes that would be necessary in our new greenhouse. One was to figure out how to apply RootShield Plus + WP (RSWP) and On-Gard at the start of the production process. As BioWorks had recently produced a new, finer RSWP Plus material that was guaranteed not to block nozzles or drip systems, we decided to inject the materials at the tray filling stage via a Dosatron through the water tunnel.

Another convincing testimonial of the benefits of RSWP Plus applications is from another grower at the south end of Deerfield. Fairview Farms was growing a crop of fall mums, which included some Ball Seed trial varieties. (There was a feature about their crop in the August edition of GrowerTalks.) They planted directly onto weed mat and then applied RSWP Plus later through the drip tape irrigation system.

Like all good growers who keep crop records, Fairview's Alan Sanderson took photos of some plant root systems at the time of application. He went the extra mile and laminated some photos, and placed them under the appropriate pots for future reference. Figure 1 shows a photo of the root structure of one of the pots. No other chemical fungicides were applied to this crop. And Figure 2 shows the excellent root system at shipping time. This certainly demonstrates the value of early application of this beneficial Trichoderma material at the start of the production cycle.

In the August article, when asked for his fall mum sales prediction for the season, Alan said that he thought that they would be very good due to all the stay-at-home gardeners. Little did he know then that he would sell out by early September—a whole month earlier than last year. Yet another vindication that our industry is doing well and is indirectly benefiting from the pandemic.

One goal mentioned in my March article was to conduct some in-field Configure applications on certain crops. Not being involved at Pioneer during the spring meant that I couldn't carry out these experiments. However, on my last visit to the greenhouse, I checked out the root systems of our field perovskia crop.

Last year we found that two greenhouse applications of Configure during the cutting propagation process improved the breaking action of each root system. Figure 3 shows this year's results, which are even better than last year. We followed the same growing procedures as last year, but reduced the plant density of the field-grown crop and did a better job of weed control this year. Maybe more nutrition available per plant and better seasonal growing conditions resulted in the more robust root system with improved vigor in the additional secondary shoots. Certainly our customers will benefit from the improved root quality of this perovskia crop.

How much would in-field Configure applications improve the shoot number of some of our other field-grown crops? With crops that can be easily divided at lifting, maybe this is a way of increasing the amount of plant material that we expect will be in demand in the spring of 2021. **GT**

Roger McGaughey, head grower at Pioneer Gardens in Deerfield, Massachusetts, was educated in Northern Ireland and England and has 47 years experience as a grower.