

GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Production

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My Biological Growing Journey

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Way back in 2006, at a Connecticut Greenhouse Growers Conference when Chris Beytes asked me to consider writing some articles for GrowerTalks, I never thought that I would contribute over 40 articles. Chris originally told me that he didn't care what my subject matter was as long as I provided readers with a take-home message. Hopefully, I've satisfied this request.

Readers first got to know me as "the White Roots Guy." Other names followed, but I'm happy to believe that they're complimentary from a growing perspective. Everything needs a good foundation and a white, healthy root structure provides any crop with a good support system. Growers need to be able to produce a range of crops. If you start with a healthy root system that has plenty of root hairs then producing quality crops is readily achievable. Initially by using PlantShield, then RootShield WP when it was developed, and after that the improved RootShield Plus, I was able to achieve my "White Roots Rule" goal.

Another goal when I began my biological journey was to produce crops without the use of chemical pesticides and fungicides. For this, I have to credit and thank Ron Valentin, Director of Technical Business, BCA at BioWorks, as he helped stoke the biological fire at a seminar in Cheshire in 2007 and provided me with the knowledge to start the banker plant and BCA programs. Ron has become a good friend and continues to share his experience and make recommendations as needed.

One of the joys of the last number of years has been meeting and interacting with a tremendous number of experienced, passionate people who are happy to share advice and support. There are too many to specifically mention everyone, but suffice it to say that I've made many new friends along the way.

Since the beginning of 2009, beneficial nematodes have been an integral part of my biological growing plan. Ensuring correct application conditions or a "Rainy Day Activity" for incorporating these little worms in safe growing practices can achieve successful control of some insect pests. Often known as "Mr. Nematode," I wholeheartedly recommend the use of *Steinernema feltiae* in any production environment.

In my later years, I've tried to pass on my knowledge and train new employees in the use of biological methods. Nine years ago, it was a refreshing experience to join Pioneer Gardens where Jaap and Arjen totally embraced the biological strategy that I brought to their company. We not only changed greenhouse practices, but also converted

field growing to incorporate some BCA practices. Currently, field and greenhouse cultures are being improved with the addition of incorporated mycorrhizal fungi.

Last year, as we all know, COVID-19 happened and my weekly involvement with Pioneer Gardens diminished. Semi-retirement happened sooner than I expected. It's also unfortunate that due to the pandemic, I won't be attending Cultivate'21. Earlier this year, before the vaccine roll-out took place, I made the choice to miss this year's conference. Instead, I'll look forward to catching up with all my industry friends at Cultivate'22.

A final thank you to my favorite editor, Jen Zurko, is in order. Jen has provided flexible deadlines and space usage, and has been a great support throughout the years. Since I'm no longer in the greenhouse on a day-to-day basis, we've mutually agreed that I'll retire from writing articles on a regular basis and maybe contribute occasionally on an "as-needed" guest appearance.

Who knows what the future will bring? I'm still involved in a consultancy capacity with Pioneer Gardens and hope to have a good relationship with them in the coming years. I'm still passionate about growing and am excited about all the biological improvements and developments that continue to evolve. Plenty of online webinars help to improve my education.

I've thoroughly enjoyed the horticultural career that has been my life for the past 50 years. For now, I'm just happy to hang out with my wife, and hopefully, spend more time with my kids and grandkids now that COVID is retreating. I'm looking forward to expanding my own perennial garden, playing more golf, being able to travel to see friends again, and most importantly, staying healthy.

To read Roger's articles through the years, go to growertalks.com/Columnists/?id=20. **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.