GROWERTALKS

Features

12/1/2022

Managing Your Greenhouse Staff

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I had a mentor of mine ask me, “Do you want to be a grower or a greenhouse manager?” I know in many cases they can be one in the same. The question posed made me think differently about each position. Yes, we need to know about growing and making decisions with the crops in the greenhouse on a daily or even hourly basis. But the management side of it is the business end, i.e., facilities, soil, water, fertilizer, pots, tags, etc.

Managing a greenhouse does have many facets and each one has to be addressed. This is where time management becomes critical. Priorities must be set on a yearly, monthly and weekly basis. Once you determine the category or time period the tasks fit into, you can organize your time management.

This is an example of a possible scenario for your planning.

August:

- Organize product selection for spring
- Order soil
- Order pots
- Order tags
- Order fertilizer and possible chemicals

September:

- Organize product selection for spring
- Order seed, plants, liners, live goods
- Cover greenhouses and/or replace roofs

October:

- Organize product selection for spring
- Winterize greenhouses if needed (northern thing)
- Clean greenhouse of debris, pots, weeds, soil under benches, insect breeding grounds, etc.

November:

- Organize product selection for spring
- Work on production schedules for spring
- Training opportunities for manager and/or grower

December:

- Tie up loose ends. As you get closer to spring, start to think about how the timeline will go. Plan your week at the end the week before. This will help you prep what you need to be efficient and effective. One of the main tasks will be employees: What will they need to do the job you want them to do?

• Employees need to be told what to do, when. Having a plan or duty list ahead of time will greatly improve your efficiencies. This may be prepping the greenhouse, transplanting or anything else needed to get the job done right and in a timely manner. You can individualize the duties by person as well, based on their strengths and abilities.

• Teach your team how to transplant. You've paid good money for either young plants in plugs or liners or spent money on seed then growing the plugs for four to six weeks. Make sure the team dibbles and places the plants into the finished container. Pushing the young plants in only adds more re-establishment time to the crop. Accuracy in transplanting has more payback than speed.

• Water training. "When in doubt, flood it out" isn't necessarily the best teaching model. Teach them to water the crop individually instead of as a whole. Later in the spring the earlier scenario may work, but early culture can only cause unwanted issues. The wet-to-dry method is best to develop a heathy plant. You'll need to assign other tasks on cloudy days or times when watering isn't needed. Over-watering is a bad habit. Give the waterers other jobs on rainy days or they will water.

Part of the management side are the overall logistics needed to grow the crop.

• Fertilizer. Use the right feed for the season. 20-10-20 might work well for May, but can only cause issues in March. Use a CaNo3-based feed early that's low P and ammonium nitrate to minimize unwanted growth and stretch.

• Integrated Pest Management (IPM) is a very important part of your success in spring production. It's more efficient and effective to know the issues when they're small than when they're taking over. Weekly crop walks are a good way to train your employees to look closely at the crop. Diseases usually show up in smaller pockets before they spread. Insects also start in a ground-zero scenario before multiplying.

For insect monitoring I would suggest yellow sticky cards placed four to six per 2,000 sq ft. Have someone read the cards at least once, if not twice weekly. Once you figure out your pest, make sure you use the right control, either chemical or biological, to irradicate the pest. Remember, too, that most chemical controls require an applicator and operator license by law. It's easier to react to a small issue and stop it before it's a large infestation.

• Organize your team ahead of time for finishing the crop. I've seen the need for all hands on deck to ship, sell and get the crop out the door when there's no one left to maintain the crop still in the greenhouse. Both the shipping and maintenance are just as important. The phrase, "Robbing Peter to pay Paul" comes to mind in this scenario.

• Controlling the growth of your crop can be done with many combinations of physical, chemical and environmental scenarios. Here are some things to think about:

-- Chemical plant growth regulators (PGR) can be very effective when used correctly. Remember these require an applicator and operator license by law. This method has been called the fine art of growing because of the precise action and reaction to the crop. Following the directions is the key for success. You can always add more, but you can't take it away once applied.

-- High light is an excellent growth controller. Quite often, unwanted growth or stretch happens in low light. This can be in a cloudier region or under a canopy of hanging baskets. Don't sacrifice your quality for quantity.

-- I mentioned earlier that the crops respond to a wet/dry scenario. Using the amount of, or lack thereof, to control your growth, is a very efficient and effective way of managing the crop. When you dry your crop down to just before flag, you're stimulating the root system to look for water. This makes for a healthier and stronger plant. Couple this with the right feed and you'll create a very strong and beautiful product.

-- Temperature plays a big part of growth control as well. One of the most common treatments is called a negative temperature differential (DIF). When your crops are waking up in the morning, they see far red light first. This is what they react to and stretch toward it. Before sunrise, dropping the greenhouse temp 2 to 4 degrees Fahrenheit can minimize the effect of the far-red light. As the crop develops and gets closer to finishing, an overall drop in daytime temperature can increase the quality of the finish crop as well. Exceptions are heat-loving crops like pentas, lisianthus and vinca, to name a few. Crops like petunias and most others can handle temps in the high 50s, while pansies and violas can go as low as 40F with no issues. Some growers will take the latter to the extreme to freezing.

I hope my insight has given you some ideas and considerations to improve your greenhouse management skills. When you're both the grower and the manager, it can be a crazy schedule. But when you're organized with all the logistics and the tools you need for spring, the unexpected is a little easier to swallow. Believe you me, there will be the unexpected. **GT**

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