

GROWERTALKS

Inside Look

2/1/2023

The Journey Into Biologicals

Jennifer Zurko



JENNIFER ZURKO

When I started at Ball Publishing 14 years ago, you could count on one hand how many growers were using biocontrols.

At first, it was this weird idea of using good bugs to fight bad bugs. There were so many questions around what to use as biocontrols and how to even do it. I don't think the term "biocontrols" was even used a lot then.

If you did the math in your head, you noticed that I became an editor for *GrowerTalks* in 2009. Roger McGaughey, who recently retired from the industry, was a longtime head grower at operations in New England and a contributor to our Growers Talk Production column. I recall he was one of the first growers in our circle to talk about using biologicals to control insects.

I went back and looked at one of his columns from 2009 and he started it as follows: "Life without having to spray my crops would be wonderful.

This year I'm setting a goal that in at least two main areas I'm going to start using biological control."

He went on to explain how he was trialing parasitic nematodes to control fungus gnats and shoreflies on New Guinea impatiens. He was very pleased with the results, so decided to expand into using biological controls on pansies and hanging baskets.

Even then Roger admitted it was "a work in progress." He was establishing a banker plant system to house the good insects and figuring out how often to switch them out to ensure a constant food source. The next step of his plan was to conduct trials using the predatory mite *Amblyseius cucumeris* to control thrips.

He ended his column with, "This will be a new venture [for us] ... wish us luck!"

Roger's last column for *GrowerTalks* was for the July 2021 issue and it was aptly titled, "My Biological Growing Journey." He thanked Ron Valentin of BioWorks for inspiring him to start using biocontrols after he attended one of Ron's talks. It helped Roger to earn the moniker of "Mr. Nematode" because he was such a proponent of them.

Roger was really one of the pioneers of growers using biocontrols. I also remember he was met with much skepticism. Now, almost every grower I visit is either actively using them or trying them out. They're more readily available, more affordable and there's more information on how to apply them. Many growers tell me that, today, they couldn't control insect outbreaks without their IPM programs, which includes biologicals.

That's why this issue is so important. We have pest management articles every month, but February's—which is focused on control and prevention of insects and diseases—is meant to bring you timely data and information on what you may encounter in the greenhouse right before the spring season.

I mentioned banker plants above when Roger started using them—we have the first of a four-part series on using banker plants to help control specific insects. This first one focuses on aphids. It will help you get started if you're a newbie. And if you're confused by the lingo used by biocontrol suppliers and experts, turn to Buglady Suzanne Wainwright-Evens' "glossary" of bio jargon.

We also have articles on diseases, including two tobamoviruses to keep an eye out for and a new *Phytophthora* strain that's affecting mums. Stanton Gill from the University of Maryland is also still flying his drones—this time to apply fungicides in woody plant nurseries.

It's been a journey into biocontrols, for you as growers and for us here at *GrowerTalks* who try and provide the best information possible. There will always be questions and new information to process, but at least we're on this journey together. **GT**