

GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Business

11/1/2023

Pushing Propagation Into the Future

Terri McEnaney



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Back when I was a kid in the 1960s, my dad Rodney oversaw the nursery's propagation—three glass greenhouses just down the street from our house and next to the homestead he grew up in. There were no alarms, cell phones or computers to monitor what was happening to those baby plants under his care. I'm sure there were plenty of stressful, sleepless nights during the Minnesota growing season.

Helping my mother raise three rambunctious boys and me while running a third-generation business with his brother and father had to be a lot of work. Fortunately, besides the business, he had and still has today at 86, a love of the outdoors, hunting, fishing and taking care of his landscape. I certainly didn't comprehend at a young age the importance of his role in production and the accumulated wisdom

from years of experience needed to have a successful propagation program.

Fast forward 50 years later and, oh, how the world of propagation has grown and changed for the better. At Bailey, we've always put emphasis on the importance of being vertically integrated and starting with a strong liner, sourcing much of our propagation material ourselves. No matter your niche in the green industry, focusing on what you do best is a strong strategy. This is what helps you differentiate yourself from the competition. Can you clearly identify what your unique offering is, your sweet spot customers, your top initiatives for the coming year?

Dave Gross has led propagation for decades, and he and his team in Minnesota, as well as Oregon and Georgia, collaborate constantly. This collaboration happens not only internally, but with growers who participate in our brand network and grower customers.

Strategically, we're focused on being one of the best liner suppliers to the industry for the basics, as well as building up liners for new introductions coming from breeding at Bailey Innovations. To go from one plant to several hundred thousand plugs or JumpStarts takes tremendous planning and coordination. Dave and his team thrive on the challenge and do a remarkable job producing a high-quality liner that will help support the launch of that next rock star plant in First Editions or the new groundbreaking hydrangea in Endless Summer.

With the genetics in the pipeline for introductions in coming years, we're just completing a 4-acre greenhouse expansion, taking advantage of many of the advances in technology, equipment, space utilization and the ability to automate the work further. We're also working on additional propagation at our Georgia facility to better serve East Coast customers growing our genetics.

Additionally, having control of your sourcing, quality and timing assures more consistency and reliability, which helps

to enhance your reputation. How much of your process do you control? At Bailey, our Sunnyside, Washington, seed orchards provide a consistent seed source. The expertise and shared knowledge gained when the Carlton Plants propagation team joined our organization has been extraordinary in Oregon. The importance of rootstock, tissue culture, seedbeds and utilization of greenhouse space while managing a propagation schedule that's complex and time-sensitive can be overwhelming.

The recent purchase of an ISO planting machine, along with a solid H-2A employee group, are good steps to hit our targeted goals for this site. I can see the excitement from our West Coast Propagation Production Manager Jeff Stoven and his crew as the automation comes on board and advances productivity to new levels. Are you always striving for continuous improvement when investing back into your company? Does it align with your long-term strategy and provide a return on investment?

The world of propagation is as complex as it's ever been, but maybe even more important today with the explosion of breeding and the introduction of new plants to the marketplace. How that plant propagates is the first step in knowing whether it can be a success. If it's slow to root or is susceptible to disease—this is the first test to pass.

Propagators of today have their own sets of challenges, yet they have many tools at their fingertips to guide their way to healthy, strong liners. Propagation isn't everyone's focus; it takes a lot of capital and expertise. Part of our strategy is to be able to be that same consistent liner source for growers as we are for ourselves with seedbeds, tissue culture, JumpStarts and JumpStarts 5.5. Whatever your business strategy, it all must tie together, leveraging a core competency and reinvesting in your company in a way that aligns with your strategies, internal and external—keeping a long-term view, knowing what you're best at and what's needed to fuel growth based on company direction.

My father still makes regular visits to the propagation greenhouses, and continues to have good questions and comments for those he's touring with. They look forward to those visits and appreciate the knowledge he shares, as well as his acknowledgment of how far we've come since he was in charge. He also likes to banter a bit, and sometimes, the conversations shift to hunting or fishing. I have great respect and appreciation for propagators around the world, but he will always be my favorite propagator! **GT**

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