

GROWERTALKS

Paul's Pointers

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Starting Strong in 2024

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They often say, "It's not how you start that's important, but how you finish!" There may be some truth to this statement with greenhouse production, as a good grower can often overcome adversity; however, when growing great plants, it's usually most important to have a strong start. When growing plants, a good start leads to a good finish.

As there's a new growing season upon us, I'd like to share some of the ways I try to begin a new growing season.

Pre-pre-season adjustments

Before a new growing season begins, it's important to look at your notes from the previous growing season and make any beneficial adjustments well before a new one begins.

- Learn what you don't know. Make a commitment to continue your education and dedicate some of your time to learning new production practices or how to overcome past problems you've faced. Trade publications such as this one, educational programs at trade events and many of the industry's webinars throughout the year (GrowerTalks hosts several each year) are great opportunities to learn what you don't know.
- Adjust any crop schedules to ensure the new crops will finish on time.
- Adjust the production facilities to improve the environmental conditions, if necessary. Think heating, cooling, horizontal air flow fans and so forth.
- Look over the past problems you've had with specific crops and adjust the future cultural programs to prevent future issues from occurring, such as environmental adjustments and preventative programs.
- It may be beneficial to change the past responsibilities of current staff or to hire new staff to address any previous shortfalls or areas that need improvement. Each department (Growing, Inventory, Shipping) will likely have differing needs. It may be necessary to modify an existing process, create new protocols, adjust certain individuals' responsibilities or to bring in individuals with the expertise you're lacking.

Pre-season tasks

Before planting the first plant, it's very important to thoroughly clean and disinfect the production facilities.

- Sweep and remove all debris.

- Use a cleaner such as Strip-It Pro and follow that with a disinfectant such as KleenGrow.
- Be sure to remove all weeds and pet plants from within and surrounding the growing areas. Some growers use the pre-emergence herbicide Marengo to prevent weeds from germinating within production facilities. Take note: Most pre-emergence herbicides are NOT labeled for applications within enclosed structures. Great care should be taken when using pre-emergence herbicides to prevent injuring future crops—be sure to follow all labeled instructions and apply them properly.
- Perform preventative maintenance on all the mechanical systems—heaters, vents, exhaust fans, injectors and etc. Don't forget the spray equipment.
- Many growers treat their water lines with cleaning agents such as Strip-It Pro before starting crops or hanging baskets to remove mineral deposits and/or biofilm that's built up inside the pipes.

Planting time adjustments

Many growers are so focused on getting the planting done that they often overlook some key areas that greatly affect the crops after they're started.

- You've heard the expression "garbage in, garbage out." With greenhouse production, this phrase means poor-quality starting materials will lead to poor-quality finished plants.
- Many growers would benefit from tightening up their quality control measures prior to planting their new crops. This entails inspecting the starting materials for any issues, including variability within the trays, poor root health, the presence of insects, mites, diseases, viruses and weeds. Avoid planting plants that have problems.
- Some crops, such as aquilegia, do not like to be planted too deeply. Planting certain crops too deeply can lead to poor establishment, crop variability and even plant losses. As a general rule, most plants need to be planted so the top of the liner is even with or just slightly below the soil level of the container they're being planted into.
- All crops would benefit from the plugs and liners being moist at the time of potting. Dry plugs tend to establish more slowly regardless of the moisture of the growing mix they're planted into.
- Adding water to the growing mix can increase soil yields by as much as 10% and allow for better planting and transportation from the potting barn to the greenhouse.
- If possible, I find it best to water the crops after potting and before they're moved into the greenhouse. If that can't happen, water them in immediately after they're set down.

The early days

Sometimes plants seem to grow themselves, but other times they need a little supervision and coaxing to reach the finish line.

- Watering is one of the most important aspects of growing plants. Not only is it critical for their survival, but irrigation also influences how they grow and their final quality, as well as impacts crop timing. Water is also a key factor with the development of foliar and root diseases. Most growers apply at least 50% more water than is necessary to grow their plants. Try to grow without applying too much water. Level 3 is the place to be.
- Proper fertility is essential to not only produce healthy crops, but to ensure they're ready by the intended sales date. Providing too little or excessive fertility will delay plant establishment and will require additional time. As you likely already know, low nutrition can lead to nutrient deficiencies and high fertility can cause the EC to increase and can lead to root rot diseases.

- Scouting weekly for insects and diseases, as well as for the need for growth regulators, is essential. If you're not already doing this, I encourage you to dedicate some time each week to more thoroughly observing your crops.

Just as much as the phrase “garbage in, garbage out” applies to our industry, I also think “strong start, strong finish” is equally applicable. The topics I highlighted above are just a few examples of how I aim to head off potential issues, start strong and finish stronger in the upcoming growing season. I hope you have a productive and successful 2024 growing season. **GT**

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