

EIGHT BASICS TO BETTER BASKETS

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Hanging baskets are an important item for foliage, flowering and bedding plant producers. Regardless of whether you are growing ferns, periwinkles or poinsettias, there are a few basics that should be followed to produce a quality hanging basket. Here are 8 things to think about when planning and producing your next crop:

Variety Selection:

Remember, not all varieties are suitable for use in a hanging basket. A cascading or trailing growth habit is extremely important to obtain a quality finished product. Many growers pot up their 'extras' in 10-inch baskets. Be certain these varieties are well adapted to use in a basket...nothing looks worse than a standard, erect variety in a hanging container.

Basket Selection:

Hanging baskets are equipped with a water catching saucer or a more sophisticated reservoir system. These devices are designed to increase the water holding capacity of the container and reduce irrigation frequency. In addition, saucers and receivers are important to consumers to protect furniture, carpets, etc. from dripping water. Avoid systems that hold excessive amounts of water and/or remove saucers before potting up plant materials. Because of their shape, baskets tend to hold water and if the growing media remains excessively wet for extended periods of time there is a significant increase in the potential for root diseases (e.g. phythium, rhizoctonia, phytophthora). Choose your system carefully, not all baskets are the same.

Number of Plants/Basket:

How quickly a grower turns the space largely determines the overall profitability of a greenhouse operation. Obviously the more plugs or cuttings a grower uses in a basket the faster the finish time. Carefully study the relationship between the increased variable cost of additional plants/pot versus the decreased fixed cost of reduced production time. Find the best balance for your operation.

Placement:

Growers should try to make maximum use of their production area. However, many times basket lines are jammed against side walls or other structural elements in the greenhouse. This can result in mis-shaped plants with flat sides or tops. Also, many basket lines over hang bench crops. In these situations growers are sometimes reluctant to irrigate the hanging containers for fear of wetting the foliage and flowers of the plant materials below. This isn't good placement of either crop.

Spacing:

Growers are always trying to squeeze in just a few more plants. It's an easy way to make the numbers look better on paper but the results can be disappointing. When baskets are jammed together, crop time is often extended as plants compete for light. Also, monitoring and controlling pest problems (both insects and diseases) can be a real challenge if plants are spaced too closely. And last but not least, when baskets are too tight together plants are often flat sided with extremely soft growth. Frequently what looked good

on paper balances out with increased loss, poor quality and a decreased price/unit.

Temperature and Light:

It's easy to determine the temperature and light levels for bench crops. However, in the areas where many hanging baskets are produced, it is a little more difficult. Also, basket lines can block a significant amount of light from the bench area. As a result, growers frequently increase the amount of light entering the greenhouse by removing or retracting shading. This can result in excessive light and temperature levels for the basket crop. Be sure you are not sacrificing one crop for another.

Plant Nutrition:

Applying the appropriate amount and concentration of fertilizer is very important in producing a quality product. Since hanging baskets are generally a longer term crop (e.g. >10 weeks) their needs may vary from bench crops. For example, many of the micronutrients may be leached from the container or unavailable to the plant towards the end of the crop. Other nutrients, such as magnesium (Mg) may also run in short supply late in the growing season. Since both the micros and Mg are frequently supplied in the form of a granular pre-plant (e.g. a granular micronutrient fertilizer package, dolomitic lime) these materials frequently leach from the container before being taken up by the plant. Special consideration should be given to providing supplemental nutrition in these areas.

Cost versus Price:

You can do a terrific job of producing a crop of hanging baskets but if you lose money on the deal the entire experience wasn't successful. Although it is relatively easy to determine the variable costs/unit (pot, media, plants, fertilizer, chemicals, etc.) for a basket crop, identifying the fixed costs can be a real challenge. Many growers look at basket lines as 'free space' since heating, cooling, maintenance, taxes, management, etc. is paid for by the bench crop. But I think we all recognize that nothing is 'free.' Knowing your costs and pricing product appropriately is perhaps the most important key to profitable basket production.

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