

Letters to the Editor

Growers Speak Out On The "Pansy Stall" Problem

Editor's note: These editorial comments and grower testimonials are solely those of the editor and contributing growers. They do not necessarily represent the opinions of the universities or their staff that support this magazine.

Editorial: *This issue of communicating what has been applied to plugs, and/or how they are grown prior to shipment has plagued our industry for ten years now. It is time to resolve this before we again travel the same road that the lack of soil ingredient information led us down. Providing this information up front will help growers. Extension specialists and independent consultants ensure a healthy, profitable crop can be grown. As academics who seek to disseminate unbiased information, we encourage a dialog between the growers and the plug producers. That is good for everyone in our industry.*

Paul A. Thomas, Managing Editor

Candi Reed

Deep South Growers, Douglas, GA

Mrs. Reed writes:

I wound up having the "stall" problem with our first pansy crop. I struggled for a while going through my list of: What did I do wrong, what did I do different, is there something wrong with my soil meter, did I order the correct soil, it's just so hot I'm getting a different response? Weeks later, I'm starting to panic, this turn of pansies is for a contract. They're supposed to be delivered in another three weeks and they don't look to well. They're still in plug stage and now starting to decline rapidly.

Shouldn't have a problem as we grow our pansies lean until we have sufficient signs of roots in the cells, especially in the heat. What have I done wrong? I've worked very hard to learn how to grow a good pansy in the south Georgia heat is a challenge. I've even convinced my customers not to try to stock pansies in their garden centers too early. Still no answers and now I've had to call all over the state looking for growers that can fill my contracts for me. It seemed strange that I had to work so hard to find 100 trays of pansies this early in the season. Little did I know I wasn't the only one with a similar problem and doing some of the same "what-did-I-do" head games.

So I say in response to the information that I was finally able to glean from our industry, fellow growers, and horticulture specialist, this is not acceptable!!! We need proper information to make management decisions!

If the plug producers change the production methods or add plant growth regulators without my knowledge, I'll likely treat them the same as I always have and be unable to produce a successful crop, or at least produce it on time. I will admit that I don't have my plug material tested unless they look like they have a problem when I receive them. The plugs we received were great looking plugs. But if they had been leaned down in fertilizer before they were sent to me, or had a significant amount of PGR applied to hold them prior to shipping, and I grew them lean on my bench to from day one, of course they aren't going to grow right! I'm a small grower, paying for 100 of flats of pansies to fill an

order for which I had already purchased plugs and grew on my bench. This loss will have a significant financial impact. Having another 200 flats that don't grow out in time for the late season market will also have a financial impact. Who's going to recoup that lost sale for me? Not the plug producer I'm sure. They sent me a perfectly good plug didn't they?

So I say to the plug producers. If you change your method of growing off the plugs, or add a PGR to hold the plug, you surely must believe it's to make a better plug. Stand up on your soapbox and shout it to the world that you have found a way to get us better plant material. We're glad you have improved things. Be the first one to shout the news, if others follow suite, so what? Copying is a form of flattery. It won't make a positive difference if you've produced a better plug if as growers, or treated the plugs to hold them back. We can't grow a healthy product on schedule without this information from you. This has got to change!

Let's not repeat this problem this spring. Please tell us if the plugs are hardened off or if PGR's have been applied. Do that, and we'll both make a profit.

Robert Mann,
Mann's Greenhouse, Hickory Flat, GA

Mr. Mann writes:

As growers of purchased plugs, we need to know the history of the plug with regards to PGR's and the "toning" process prior to shipping. We definitely need the plug producers to provide step by step recommendations for treatment of the plugs after we receive it. This advice should include whether or not PGRs have been applied, when the next application should occur if needed, the recommended fertility regime for transplant based upon their production scheme (toned or not toned) and any other pertinent information that might affect management decisions.

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Scott Vanderstelt,
Golden Pines Greenhouses, Columbia, SC

Mr. & Mrs. Vanderstelt write:

The week of 09/11/00 we received in a shipment of pansy plugs, which appeared normal. They were planted up and treated preventively with Subdue/Clearys 3336 for root pathogens. After several days in the greenhouse under shade, they were put outside along with the other crops of pansies. After two weeks they had grown no more than a planting which was only three days old. We began searching for reasons. We did tested soil for pH, EC, and pathogens. We sent plugs to Clemson to check for root pathogens, and alerted our plug broker to the problem and asked for their assistance.

All of the tests came back negative and other plugs of different shipments from the same supplier planted at about the same time were growing off normally and being sold. At the advice of our Extension service people and other industry experts, we asked the plug grower to supply us with information concerning what products these plugs had been treated with and when. Once we complained, our plug supplier cooperated within an hour or two with the information. Seven weeks after planting we are finally able to ship some of this material, however, it is not growing off consistently and requires much sorting. We anticipate losing about 25% of the total amount of plugs planted.

Although the plug supplier has offered credit for the value of the plugs it should be noted that we lost a large pre-booked order to a regular landscape customer, and we lost use of production space as this crop is still in a production area and should be gone.

We intend to begin requiring all plug suppliers to GPG to supply with the shipment all information pertinent to the culture of the plugs, we think that this should include sow date, fertilization, all chemicals applied, (name, date, concentration, method). We think the best way to do this is to poll a group of growers with the same concerns and develop a standard form, which would include all of the necessary information. We also see this as a first step in a proactive qualification of plug suppliers by the grower customer. We understand that many growers have experienced similar problems this season and believe that we should work together cooperatively to prevent future occurrences.

Myrna Trapp,
Woodsong Greenhouse, Monroe GA

Ms. Trapp writes:

After a miserable summer with dead sales due to hot, dry weather, I looked forward to an active fall with heavy pansy sales as people filled out beds that had suffered during water restrictions. As pansy plugs arrived, we planted them up and eagerly awaited results.

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Growth was slow. I blamed it on Sept. heat. Then I began to suspect inexperienced employees weren't watering correctly. Finally, I began to realize that some varieties weren't growing at all. The plants were no bigger than the original plugs. The roots had not left the plug ball. By the time I called my county agent, I was convinced I'd screwed up and was embarrassed to show him what the plants looked like. Now I'm angry with myself for not calling sooner as I learn the problem is widespread and that if I'd known how the plug growers had treated the plugs I could have responded to the problem earlier and prevented some of the delay. Many of the vegetative cutting suppliers send suggestions for growing on their product. I have never received such information from a seedling plug grower. Imagine how useful that could have been. Is anyone listening out there?

Steve Waddell
Rountree Plantation, Charlotte, NC

Mr. Waddell writes,

We grow deep 1801's for the landscape market from 288 plug trays. Finish crop time is 5 weeks from transplant date. We bring in plugs each week from mid August thru mid-October, contract growing for the landscape market. We prebook our pansies from a predetermined weekly inventory list. We are scheduling our pansies to be ready after 5 weeks. 85 - 100% of our pansies are prebooked for the month of October so any disruption or delay causes major problems.

We experienced a total crop delay this fall in one of our weekly shipments. Out of 9 weekly shipments, we experienced the delay in our 4th shipment. We did not experience any delay before this date or right after this date. In week 4 from transplant date, the pansies had a hard stunted look which we have observed in the past from too much plant growth regulators. Hardly any growth had resulted in 50 - 75% of the plants in each of flat from week 2 to week 4. By week 5 only 35 - 40% of entire crop were salable. This was after spending labor dollars grading thru each flat. From week 6 thru week 8, each flat had to be graded thru to be salable. The root system of the plant was acceptable but the body of the plant was ^o to 1/3 of what it should have been.

We only use B-9 at 2500 - 5000 ppm as a PGR at week 2 in the production plan. I am not 100% certain, but from experiencing this delay, and fact that the plugs had a look of excessive PGR, I suspect an overdose. If the plug producer had offered a crop history to the grower, at time of receiving plugs I might have changed my production program to adjust for PGRs already having been applied. Having this kind of record would eliminate the excessive use of chemicals and eliminate plug producers as the source of problems down the road.