

Grower To Grower

by JEAN D. AYLSWORTH



Mixing It Up In Georgia

WHILE indications are that growers in a number of states have had problems with growth media, Georgia growers seem to have had more trouble than most. A representative of the Georgia Department of Agriculture says losses in Georgia due to media problems amounted to more than half a million dollars in 1992 alone. (See related story on page 51.)

We spoke with several growers who were willing to tell us about their experiences.

OMEGA

Tommy Hornbuckle, of **Hornbuckle Greenhouse**, says he has never seen anything like the recent problems he's had with growth media in more than 40 years in the greenhouse business.

On the recommendation of a salesman, Hornbuckle agreed to try a pick-up load of growing mix in 1992.

"It looked good and the plants performed well in it," he says. "Besides, it was a little cheaper than what we had been using. We bought a trailer load — and it was all downhill from there."

The consistency of the mix he bought seemed very different from that of the mix he had tested.

"We had a difficult time getting unrooted cuttings into the mix — we had to punch holes to get them in," he says. "And we couldn't use tube watering since the water would go right through. Our poinsettia cuttings developed calluses and the roots didn't develop. We had trouble keeping good color in some of our other plants."

Hornbuckle says he switched to an-

other mix and there was a complete turnaround.

"There's no doubt that the problem was with the growth medium," he says. "We had it tested and the pH was high. The salesman admitted they'd left out the starter mix."

He says his losses amounted to more than \$200,000. In addition to being out the cost of the growth medium itself, he lost some entire crops. Other plants he tried to salvage and ship to customers — only to have them lose faith in the quality of his production.

CANON

Dean Wallace, manager of **Sunny Hill Greenhouses and Nursery**, says overdoses of trace elements killed impatiens, New Guinea impatiens, begonias, peppers, and tomatoes at that operation.

"It wasn't the mix by itself that

killed the plants, but we lost them when we used the fertilizer program we'd been using for 15 years," Wallace says. "We didn't know the mix was high in trace elements. Once we had an overdose of magnesium, there wasn't anything we could do about it."

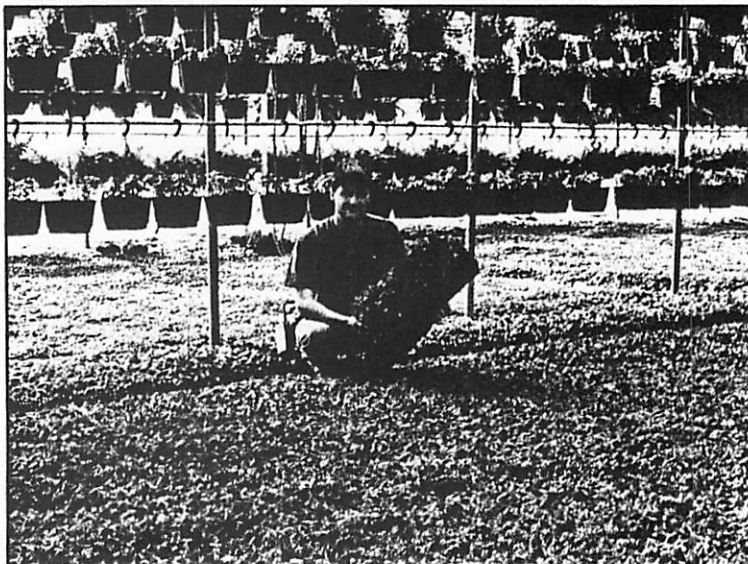
Wallace and Sunny Hill owner **Larry Leard** had to dump the mix and all the plants they'd started in it. Losses amounted to \$12,000.

"When we had this problem, the media company did nothing to try to help us," Wallace says. "The salesman and distributor admitted they didn't know what was in the bags. This new law will force all media companies to be more responsible."

ACWORTH

Sam Rambo, of **Rambo Nursery**, ran into media problems earlier than many growers. His troubles go back

Since losing 15,000 poinsettia plants and other crops, Sam Rambo of Acworth, GA, now tests every load of growth media.





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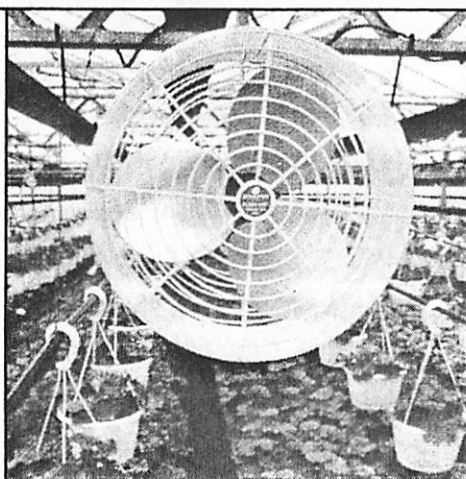
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to 1988 when he switched from large bale to loose bag mix.

"The salesman came by and we ordered a full truckload," he says. "It was poinsettia season and we were trying to root cuttings from our own stock plants. The roots would start to develop and then would knot up and turn away from the growth medium. We tried to grow poinsettias from cuttings we got from other growers and had the same problem."

Rambo tried everywhere he could think of to find help, but no one seemed to be interested.

He lost nearly 15,000 poinsettias that year as well as foliage and other crops.

"Now we know to test the growth medium in every load. It was an expensive lesson to learn," he says.

CORDELE

Another Georgia grower, who asked not to be named, says she lost \$20,000 due to a faulty growing mix from a major company. Ironically, she had been using mix from the same company for 17 years with no problems at all. Then, in 1991, she got three loads that seemed to cause a strange mold to develop on the top of the growing mix in hanging baskets. Begonias wouldn't root in the medium and growth was stunted in other crops. Geraniums and poinsettias grew no more than 3 inches tall.

"The growth media company agreed to test the mix, but that took several months and by then the season was over," she says. "I've learned not to be so trusting."

When company representatives did get back to her, they implied the problem was all the grower's fault — although they offered a half load of mix free if she would sign an agreement not to pursue litigation against the company.

"I was up against the wall and no one would help me," she says. "The company made it clear there would be no negotiation. I knew that as a small grower I wouldn't have much chance up against a big company — so I accepted their offer."

Her recommendation to other growers? Keep bags of unopened mix from each shipment for future reference and find an independent lab to test your media.

"Then if you have a problem, you'll have the data to back you up," she says.

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