

VIEWPOINTS

In our survey of clerks' care of plants, watering is the biggest problem. Plants sitting in the hot sun need watering two, three, or four times daily.

from the garden center



PLANT CARE

**By Doc & Katy Abraham
Garden Center Operators**

Doc & Katy, both college trained, not only have the technical background, but also speak from experience. They owned and operated a commercial greenhouse and retail nursery & landscape business for over a quarter of a century. In addition to writing for 125 newspapers, Doc & Katy have authored several books on horticulture and have their own TV program over WOKR, Channel 13, an ABC affiliate in Rochester, NY.

This past summer we surveyed 13 garden centers to see how the clerks are caring for flowering and foliage plants. Unlike many plants we saw in supermarkets, the garden centers did a great job caring for the plants. The big problem is watering. Plants sitting in the hot sun need watering two, three, or four times daily. The roots are in a small soil ball, foliage is in the hot sun and drying winds, and the soil mixes are highly organic and will dry out quickly. Hence the need for giving the plants ample water. "Soak 'em good" is poor English but good advice.

The problem some supermarkets encounter is that clerks haven't been schooled to water the plants frequently. Growers spend a lot of time producing a quality product and lose control of it once delivery is made. A store manager can prevent the sorry spectacle of wilted or dead plants by reminding the attendant to soak the plants two or three times and keep them off the blacktop and out of the hot sun. A good way to prevent dehydrated plants is to place them in wooden trays lined with plastic. Water is poured into the trays rather than the individual plants.

Some restaurants and other places of business are guilty of plant neglect. A waiter can walk past a planting gasping for water and still never see the dying

plants. When we see this, we don't mind asking the clerk to give his plants a shot of water.

Ornamental Kale

Soon frost will knock out many flowering plants, in many areas, but the winners will be ornamental kale and flowering cabbage. Their color is brightest and best after the first frost. Now's a good time to remind your customers what a great bedding plant these ornamentals are, and they'll try them next year. One pest of these plants is the cabbagelooper. Home gardeners can dust some cayenne powder on the plants, or use a non-toxic spray of *Bacillus thuringiensis* (BT) sold in all garden centers.

Garden Talks

Pretty soon chores will be tapering off and you will be asked to talk to envi-



ronmental groups. Few people are more qualified to talk about saving our earth than gardeners and people in our growing business. Use plenty of facts and figures to drive home your points. Every chance you get to save our water, do it. You might want to mention the baby diaper issue. Eighteen billion disposable diapers are dumped in landfills each year, accounting for 5% of all household waste. Every baby uses 10,000 diapers, and a disposable diaper can take 500 years to break down. The latest thing is cloth diapers (the old

fashioned cotton kind). They can be reused 50 to 100 times and then are recycled as rags. And don't forget the ReLeaf program backed by everyone in our industry.

Diatomaceous Earth

Many readers of *Nursery Business RETAILER* are using a non-chemical pesticide known as diatomaceous ("die-uh-toe-may-shus") earth. This is a material mined from the sea. Diatoms are the "grass" of the oceans and lakes. Just as green grass is the staple food of earth animals, diatoms (algae) are the food of the ocean or fresh water grazers. When "DE" (short for the term) die, their shells pile up on the bottom to form deposits. These are mined and sold as an "insect dust." The idea that ordinary dust is lethal to insects is nothing new. Ever watch chickens, sparrows, and other birds take a dust bath? Animals roll in dust to get rid of ticks, fleas, etc. DE kills insects by attacking the wax coating that covers their external skeleton. Their sharp needles penetrate the insect, causing moisture to ooze from the wound. DE is cheap and plentiful and perhaps it should get more attention in our losing battle against bugs. *Nursery Business RETAILER* readers who have used DE, please write and tell us about it.

Nursery Business RETAILER Clinic

"We've been making and selling birdhouses out of treated lumber. Someone told us you shouldn't use treated wood for bird feeders or birdhouses. Is that true?"

Answer: We took this matter up with Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology, and they tell us it's best not to make birdhouses or feeders from treated lumber. Most wood preservatives are toxic to birds, and another factor is that pressure treated lumber is more expensive. People are more likely to take the time to build nest boxes if they can be built inexpensively. Best material is 3/4" white cedar, western cedar, or exterior grade plywood. Other woods such as pine, spruce, and poplar are easier to work.

Want to attract bluebirds? Send us a self-addressed, stamped envelope for our bulletin for making all kinds of birdhouses. ■