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Reduce Handling Losses

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Crop shrinkage is one aspect of producing ornamental crops that I and my colleagues take seriously as Extension Specialists because of the dramatic effect it has on profits. For most growers, the shipping season has begun, and I have noticed that many of the losses that occur between the bench and the store shelf are avoidable and can be reduced. Remember, another way to look at loss reduction is increasing production. A 1% increase is production and sale of exhisting plants yeilds a 24% increase in net profits. You already have paid for the overhead and direct costs, so any loss reduction turns into profit. Lets look at what we can do to reduce handling and shipping loss.

Greenhouse:

Before you ship a crop, look at the orientation and spacing of the crop. Pull a few units. Do branches or flower scapes snag? Do you have to pull the unit out s specific way to avoid this? Could an alternate spacing design prevent this? Note what you see and make sure the supervisor managing the pullers knows what to tell the employees.

Consider the growth habit of the plant. Upright plants usually sustain damage from lose staking, tipping over during cop removal from the bench, and snagging another plant during removal. Hanging baskets that are close together can have branches broken if removal from he hanging pipe isnt diligent.

Consider also the brittleness of the crop. For perennial growers and specialty vegetative annuals, there are many species with very brittle stems. Coleus and Geraniums with overlapping branches are easily broken by lifting crops up off the bench instead of sliding them out and up. Stems of these kinds of plants cannot sustain a downward pressure on their stems. Sideways and upwards has less potential for breakage.

Just like Poinsettias, breaking one branch at the bench, one in the shipping process and one in staging byt itelsf may not seem like a lot at each site, but it yeilds a worthless plant on the

What you will need:

1). Notepad on a clipboard and a couple of pens.

2). Set Time to observe crop handling during shipping

3). A digital camera to document issues

4). An Excel spreadsheet premade to record % losses

5). A scheduled time to meet with supervisors

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Taking time to look at how plants are being handled, and assessing if there are improvements to be made can yeild significant profits.

The poinsettia crop may have been shipped on time, but the evident damage suggests improper spacing, harvesting or sleeve placement.

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retail sale shelf. Every plant cultivar and species is different but almost all plants potentially sustain damage when removed from the bench. Use your eyes and look for potential issues.

Once that is done, observe the crew in action. Are they following orders? Do they place plants or are they slinging them onto the carts or trays? More attention is needed the first 30 minutes of the day when teh pace and technique is set, and the last hour when workers are tired. Another thing to look out for is overhang on carts. Are plant parts or flats sticking out. Are flowers being damaged by hitting the shelf above? Are they being disheveled by being bounced around or rocked back and forth between the greenhose and the shipping dock? Follow a cart train to the shipping dock. You might be surprised.

Shipping Dock:

How carefully is the skip loader operator placing the carts? Are there any big bumps between the dock and the truck bed? Are carts being braced for side to side impacts, and are they sufficiently packed to prevent sliding around? Are the plants sufficiently watered but not too wet to make the trip? Are pot copts being pinched or pressed during loading?

Retail Sale Merchansing:

Muich can happen when the plants arrive at the retail facility. The only way to assess this is to go out and meet a dlivery truck without the driver knowing you are there. How are the plants unloaded? Is the local receiving dock compatible with your truck? Are any store employees handling the materials? How are the carts being unpacked? Are trays unpacked and individual plants staged at the retail site carefully? Scan for broken plant parts. Take a few back and discuss it with your shipping manager. Have your crew look 2 and 4 days into the shelving of the crop for delayed damage from bent stems, broken or bent flower scapes and broken leaves. Not all damage is apparent the day the crop is staged.

If you merchandise your own product, you'll likely already have a plan in place for evaluating handing at that stage. If not, get one fast. Ask the merchandising team to watch how customers pull plants off the shelf. Is the pot spacing or orientation causing problems? Can customer-caused damage be reduced somehow? Have them report on how much loss there is for each crop and what they think is the cause and solution for that loss.

Collecting Data:

As with any benchmark anaylsis, establishing a rate of loss at each step gives you the power to make improvements before it costs your 2, 4 or 10% of your crop. Have you supervisors make quick, "% loss" reports at each of their stages of handling. Look for trends? Is one crop a particular problem? Is one team a problem? Are certain days bad? Once you have the data, keep an Excel spreadsheet for each of your crops (or at least overall loss at each stage) so that you can assess what changes will be economically worth while, and what issues can be addressed. Keeping records on this aspect of production will also empower you to reduce losses and increase profits elsewhere as the concept of benchmarking loss becomes an adopted practice in your company.