

Do You Struggle With Control Issues?

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Question: What do a woman, a tornado and a hurricane have in common?

Answer: They all get the house!

I'd been a single father for quite a while and was used to running the show at home, but since I got married over a year ago, I've given up some of the control around the house. Okay, to be honest, I lost my position as head of the household.

Not at work though! In my 23 years in the greenhouse business, the most profound change for me is that I'm much more of a control freak now. Not because I'm bitter about the change of leadership at home, but because of my crops. I've learned that we don't just grow plants, we control plant growth. Much more than we've ever been able to before. And I don't like not being in control of my crop.

When it comes to controlling plant growth, I had no formal education outside of the basics I learned at Iowa State University. Dave Koranski was a great professor while I attended ISU, but he sent me into the real world unprepared to grow short, compact plants. I don't recall ever discussing plant growth regulators (or maybe we learned about PGRs in that 7:30 a.m. class I found so difficult to attend) and the concept of negative DIF was in its infancy.

Either way, when I came to Swift's I was mentored by my friend Phil for a little over a year until he moved on and left me on my own. From there, I just continued with what he taught me about controlling plant growth: turn the thermostats down 5 degrees first thing in the morning (we didn't have computer controls) and spray 5,000 ppm B-Nine weekly as necessary on the annual plugs and bedding plants. As far as perennials were concerned, I knew B-Nine didn't work, so they grew how they wanted.

Until one day ... which I remember very clearly. I had a few 288 trays of hollyhocks in the plug house that were at least 4 inches tall and had maybe three leaves. When my boss saw them, all he said was "do something about that."

That's when it all started. I did something about that. I bought a quart bottle of a fairly new product called Sumagic. I don't remember what rate I sprayed on those hollyhocks, but I do remember ... they never grew again.

Thus, began my love affair with the sweet smell of Sumagic, fueling my obsession for control. At the time, there wasn't any literature available for growth regulating perennials and there was no Google, so we wrote our own book. Over the years, nearly all varieties of perennials we grow have tasted Sumagic at some point and their response has been documented. Varieties, which are easily stunted by Sumagic—such as campanula—have been identified, as well as those on which Sumagic has very little effect—like gaillardia.

Additional information we've collected over the years has been on timing of application. In general, we've found that if Sumagic is applied as early as possible, additional applications—usually at a higher rate—can be avoided or minimized. The goal is to control growth, not stop it. For our flowering potted perennials, two timely applications of 10 ppm (lowa rates!) is often enough to provide controlled growth and a compact plant. We don't use Sumagic as a crutch, but as a tool in our IPM program.

Right about the time I discovered Sumagic, we got our first computerized environmental controls. Now I was able to experiment with the new concept of negative DIF, dropping temperatures two hours before sunrise until two hours after sunrise. The general recommendations I knew were to use 3 to 5 degrees of DIF to control stretch. I programmed that into my computer and it worked! My crops were more compact and I used less Sumagic. But that wasn't good enough ... we've found that the greater the negative DIF, even as much as 20 degrees, the more control we can exert on our crops.

So while control freaks sometimes get a bad rap, in this case it's a good thing. In our business, the careful combination of PGRs and DIF leads to a compact "in control" product. **GT**

