

INNOVATION IN ACTION

BY JASMINA DOLCE AND TIM

Horticulture isn't exactly the most tech savvy of industries. Growers oftentimes are slow to change, but implementing a new process, piece of equipment or technique can make a world of a difference. We spoke with three growers to discuss what changes they've made in production to improve efficiencies and remain profitable.



ADDRESSING LABOR AT ZINO NURSERY

When Hardscrabble Farms, a tree farm headquartered in Croton Falls, New York, purchased greenhouse space four years ago in Dover Plains, New York, the location had been abandoned for 12 years and was in desperate need of renovation.

The purpose of the new location — which currently operates 12 acres of production under the name Zino Nursery — was to produce perennials, grasses, shrubs, evergreens, ferns and other similar products for its wholesale customers.

Because of the nature of the work, they knew finding labor would be a problem. “It was very difficult to find people that are willing to do a lot of the manual labor everyday,” says Brady Cullen, general manager of Zino Nursery. “Part of what we do here is 1-, 2- and 3-gallon-sized pot production. It is a lot of lifting all day long.”

Another issue is labor costs. “We’re not even close to minimum wage,” shares Cullen. “Because of our relation to New York City and the high cost of housing, we have to pay quite a large hourly rate to get even an entry-level person in.”

After acquiring the space, a year was spent renovating the greenhouses. The grower knew automation would be necessary. “This is where our relationship with Griffin comes in,” shares Cullen. “We depend on Griffin for their high

level of service and industry expertise and are grateful to have an industry partner that is always there to help guide us through new upgrades and expansion ideas.”

“The potting line was key,” says Cullen. “When we purchased the greenhouses, our intention was to renovate based upon the potting line so that we could expand quickly with the same amount of people.”

Zino Nursery began with 10 employees, and with the implementation of potting lines from Pack Manufacturing, along with upgrades along the way, the company has since expanded and still employs the same 10 people.

They purchased a whole system from Pack Manufacturing that includes a soil mixer, an incline conveyor and a potting machine. On a good day, Cullen says they are able to do upwards of 10,000 to 12,000 pots in a day, a task that if done manually would only be able to have an output of 1,000 pots per day.

Since the technology was new, Cullen says they were unsure of how fast the line would go. “We’re currently at the stage where we have blown through the original design because we realized we could go a lot faster.”

He says the goal is to get to 16,000 to 18,000 pots per day. He adds, “It might not be that we’re on the potting line all day. Because it’s 10 people, some are on the potting line and those

same people are going to do orders for the day. When we have to do shipments, those same people are loading the trucks and trimming back the shrubs.”

Cullen explains that it is quite beneficial for the staff to increase output because every single member is capable of doing every single job. “We try to rotate what the employees are doing all day to avoid that complacency factor,” he says. “No one wants to be on a potting line for 10 hours a day.”

According to Neal Farnham, a regional sales manager with Griffin who works closely with Zino Nursery, Hardscrabble Farms has a unique vision and is in a place of growth within the marketplace.

“As labor costs continue to rise, sometimes adopting costly technology and automation is an option that growers have to take into serious consideration. When we have customers who have this vision of incremental growth, it is really a bright spot to work with people like Zino Nursery,” says Farnham. “We capitalize on that to make sure that the customer is successful because it’s a rare breed that has that kind of vision.”

