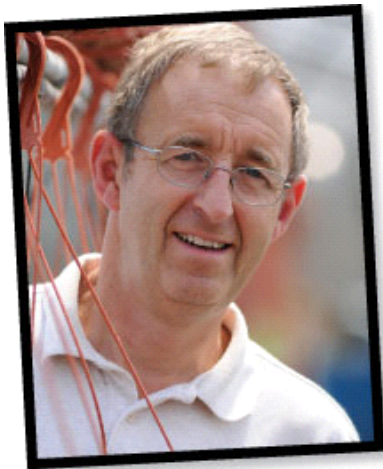


### Growers Talk Production: Goodbye Pythium, Three Cheers for BCAs

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All spring I haven't thrown out one pot due to Pythium root rot. Isn't that amazing? We've had some plant losses this year, but they've been due to above-the-soil surface problems and even then the bad plants often had a good root system. With no losses in my 2010 poinsettia crop, to reach mid May with similar success was very satisfying. And it certainly saves a lot of dollars in unused chemical fungicides.

I may sound like a stuck record, but I firmly believe my successes are in large part due to applying RootShield wetttable powder at planting. My nematode use and some cultural practices definitely help, but establishing a healthy white root system as early as possible is of paramount importance.

Trying something for the first time may be a challenge for some growers. As we all know, there's a lot at stake with our crops. But believe me, using RootShield wetttable powder is a no-brainer. No REI, no paperwork to fill in, and white roots as a result should make it an easy decision. Added to ease of use, the extra benefits from a good root system also need to be recognized. These include: lower fertilizer usage due to more root hairs; reduced fungus gnat populations; generally cleaner crops less prone to fungal diseases; and because of all the above, a quicker crop time can be achieved.

Growing a good crop means you have to protect it and keep it clean. So far this year, my biological control agents have performed well, but it does take persistence. Surprisingly, my *Aphidius colemani* population carried over from last spring and parasitized my early, unprotected banker plants in December. This meant I had to raise a new crop of cereal aphids on new banker plants, which I now protect with a triple layer of hairnets. The cold, wet weather this spring meant the *Aphidius* population wasn't as active as it might have been, so I now have even more young aphids being produced. With warmer weather coming, aphid mummies (some on my banker plants and some new introductions) that have not yet hatched into adult *Aphidius*, will have a new food source and my population should increase.

It's always neat to see the total pest control cycle in operation and that's what happened today. While inspecting some perennials in the fields for leaf diseases after the last long period of wet weather, I noticed an aphid on a geum plant. On closer inspection, I found a few more aphids. At the same time, out of the crop canopy flew lots of *Aphidius colemani*, one actually landing on my hand. Since I felt the control situation was being taken care of, I decided to let nature take its course for the time being. A new yellow card placed in that area quickly caught some *Aphidius colemani*, some fungus gnats and a few hunter flies. Good to see the natural fungus gnat predators coming back.

So far inside the greenhouse, we (my young scout and I) have only found one small colony of aphids. He found it a few weeks ago on a verbena hanging basket near the louver in a plastic house. Otherwise, the banker plant system and my nematode sprays have kept the plants clean. I'm sure the imminent hot weather will bring more, so we'll have to be even more vigilant.

Even with all the recent lousy weather, my crops have stayed relatively free of botrytis. No other diseases have reared their heads either. I have still had the confidence to continue with weekly nematode sprays and my thrips population to date is almost non-existent as a result. I've done a few selective fungicide sprays—mainly of the protectant variety—but life is not totally sprayless; I've used a lot of growth regulator on our spring crops, as is the norm. If someone could come up with BCAs to apply the correct PGR to a crop at the right time and right rate, we might just have an easier time. We certainly have come a long way in the last few years. The BCA future is bright. **GT**

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Roger McGaughey, head grower at Michael's Greenhouses in Cheshire, Connecticut, was educated in Northern Ireland and England and has 40 years experience as a grower.