



Information

DOVE
ASSOCIATES

Horticultural Consultants

Weggs Farm

Common Road

Dickleburgh, DISS

Norfolk IP21 4PJ

Tel: 01379 741200

Fax: 01379 741800

Email: info@dovebugs.co.uk

www.dovebugs.co.uk

The care of plants on the garden centre

To the discerning retailer the opportunities for impulse sales with plants are far greater than with any other product, but because they are living things they require more skill and expertise in their handling and presentation.

A book could be written on the care of plants on garden centres, in this short space we can only touch on the more important aspects:

- watering
- protection
- temperature levels
- staking
- feeding
- pests and diseases
- display beds

The care of plants is not a matter of a few major decisions at infrequent intervals; it lies in the timely carrying out of many small and often routine tasks on a daily basis.

Watering

More plants are ruined by over watering than by any other neglect, and where trees and shrubs in containers are concerned more are ruined by under watering than by over watering.

Watering is a very basic and often neglected part of a garden centre's everyday life. Ample water reserves for a plant are crucial to preserve its healthy look. Whilst we may joke about the rain it does very little to our containerised plants in providing adequate moisture.

Regular inspection of all containerised plants on your centre is important. Do not rely on the looks of the compost surface to decide whether to water or not. Pick the plant up and feel the weight. You will soon see the difference between a dry and wet plant! Teach your staff to judge dryness by weight; the difference in weight of the average plant in a four-litre container between dry and saturated is some five pounds. If your staff get in the habit of picking up a few plants each day they will soon become used to correlating weight and water requirement.

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Water requirement is affected by:

POSITION. Be aware of the difference between plants stood on the outside rows and those in the centre of the beds. The outside rows will dry out quicker than the inside rows. It is always worth knocking a plant out of the pot and inspecting the moisture levels on the inside if you are unsure.

COMPOST. Different composts retain different reserves of moisture. Peat and bark on the one hand retain smaller amounts of water when compared with peat and sand or grit. Soil based composts retain vast amounts of water.

PLANT SIZE. Plant size can affect the rate at which the water is consumed in a pot. Large plants in a small pot may need more frequent watering than smaller plants in the same size pot. Don't rely on pot size to determine the frequency of watering.

Don't be misled by summer rain, it is seldom of much consequence where container grown plants are concerned, once again go by weight. *Water by fact and not by fancy.*

Modern peat and grit composts stood on a free draining base are very well drained and quickly shed surplus water. Plants in containers can be dry at any time of the year. Some garden centres stop watering in October and don't start again until March. This is plain neglect. It is often necessary to water in December; go by the plant, if it's dry, water it.

The *process* of watering is not just squirting water over a plant, but placing it where it is needed most. Encourage your staff to water the pot not the plant, and to use a rose over the end of the hosepipe. Many small plants can be without compost after watering by a strong jet!

The modern peat based composts, if allowed to dry out will shrink away from the side of the pot. When you next water, it pours straight through the gap rather than into the compost, and the plant has not received any. If this happens, purchase a compost wetting agent such as Aquagro, mix with water in a can and water the plants with it. Go back and water again, with water only, in an hour or two.

TIMING. Take care when watering outside on bright sunny days. The sudden change in leaf temperature from the hot sun to cold water will cause local death of leaf tissue. On hot days try to do your watering early in the morning or late afternoon.

Consider installing an automatic irrigation system. By applying water at night valuable staff that would normally be out watering can be serving customers in the day. Beware, though, of auto-mania. No automatic irrigation system is the panacea of all watering ills. You still need to be out amongst the plants checking that they are not over or under watered. Install efficient irrigation equipment, and provide a time clock so that your watering can be done at night. Not only do you avoid drowning your customers and staff but also you can water when there is least wind (about 3 to 6 a.m.) and consequently more satisfactory coverage.

Protection

If we grew in our gardens only plants that are hardy under all conditions, they would be very dull places indeed. Many plants in common use are subject to winter damage in varying degrees and the conditions on most garden centres are harsh. Plants are exposed on open wind-swept sites designed more to provide uninterrupted viewing by customers than any semblance of a reasonable plant habitat.

On any garden centre protected situations exist or can be contrived. The main enemy is cold, desiccating wind and that means northerly and especially easterly winds. Protection from both these quarters helps. Protection of plants from cold winds is important. Whilst it may look as if views

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are being blocked the erection or planting of windbreaks round the perimeter is a sound investment against lost stock.

The very worst conditions occur when the containers are frozen solid and in consequence no water is available to the roots, whilst desiccating winds rob the stems and foliage of moisture. Evergreens particularly suffer in these conditions and they are often the most attractive of winter plants and the most saleable.

Don't let the pots dry out in winter, keep the plant well topped up with moisture. Keep some netting handy to throw over plants in very severe conditions. It won't matter that customers can't see them; under those conditions you won't have any customers.

Temperature levels

Plants dislike quick changes in extremes of temperature. Intense heat followed by freezing conditions are sure killers, even though the plant is able to naturally survive both. During late spring and early autumn these conditions can prevail. Protect the plants by placing woven netting over them at night.

Bright sunlight can also be a killer to some plants. If the plant is shade loving don't place it out in the direct sunlight. Give it some protection by siting it away from direct sunlight, maybe in a purpose built shade area.

Staking

Plants will continue to grow after they are delivered to you, and may get leggy or misshapen. Be prepared to spend time retying them or even trimming the misshapen ones. Inserting a few canes and displaying a plant on them can make it very attractive to your customers.

Feeding

Feeding a plant when it is on your beds can make all the difference to its saleability. When they leave the nursery, plants have a good supply of fertiliser, but it does not last forever. In the summer growing season most of the fast growing shrubs and herbaceous subjects benefit from liquid feed applications every two weeks. Use products such as Phostrogen, Liquinure and similar from your own shelves. Choose products that are higher in Potash than Nitrogen and then you will enhance the colour of leaves and flowers rather than promote rapid growth.

If you have had plants standing outside over the winter period then they need top dressing in the spring with a solid fertiliser such as Triabon, Vitax Q4, or even products from your own shelves like Miracle Grow, Monsanto or Murphy.

Liquid feeding is a simple process using a diluter or injector system. It is best carried out early morning or late afternoon and definitely not during bright sun. When top-dressing, avoid getting fertiliser on the leaves or leaf axils of plants as that will cause death of the plants where it touches.

Pests and diseases

There are few major pests or diseases you are likely to encounter whilst stocking plants. Aphids and Red Spider Mites are the two main ones to look out for. Aphids are easily controlled by a range of products. Many of these have a very short harvesting interval and the plants can be sold very quickly after spraying. Red Spider, on the other hand, is a little more difficult to kill. Materials like Polysect, Sybol Extra, Dimethoate and many others are more suitable. They do, however, have a

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harvesting interval and customers should be advised if the plants have been sprayed in the last couple of days. Consider the use of a biological method out on the beds. You can shout about it and it becomes a sales point rather than negative issue.

Fungi are not likely to be much of a problem beyond the mildews on some herbaceous subjects in the late summer, Rhizoctonia on heathers and black spot on roses in wet periods. Routine sprays of products like Rovral, Nimrod, Systhane and PBI Supacarb will help in keeping them at bay. Again, check on the label concerning advising customers about date of spraying.

Some diseases show up on plants that cannot be controlled easily, for example fireblight on cotoneasters and many other rosacea plants. Phytophthora on conifers and some shrubs is also a disease that cannot be readily treated once it shows up. Nurseries take very stringent measures on both of these diseases to prevent them appearing on your plants.

Display beds

The beds on which the plants stand are often forgotten as being an important aspect of the plants' health and looks. Many weed seeds and diseases can be harboured in dirty display beds. Keep them clean of weeds and spray them with Panasan each year to kill off any seeds and algae that are present in them. If you use products like Jeyes Fluid to sterilise them, give time for the phenols to be evaporated off before standing plants down on them. Liverwort growth can be kept at bay by an application of Mogaton. Spinout is very good at preventing plants from rooting through into sand.

If you use sand as a base, make sure it has adequate drainage facilities as many plants are killed because they stand in water. Gravel is a better product for mixed plant sites. It allows good drainage under the pot and prevents water from one plant being taken up by another. Weeds are less likely to get a hold in a gravel display bed.

Conclusions

One never gets something for nothing, and putting a little effort into the care and maintenance of plants on the garden centre will pay off. How many plants do you end up throwing away through neglect? It is not profitable for you to replace plants that you received in good condition.

If at any time you have a problem either in the selection of suitable equipment for plant care or a disease problem that eludes you, please do feel free to contact us. We will be only too pleased to help. If you would like assistance in the planning of new container display beds, irrigation equipment or other associated equipment, please feel free to seek our advice.

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