

# **EXPERIENCES IN GROWING AND MARKETING TREES AND SHRUBS IN GROW-BAGS**

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For 15 years my business has operated from a location in Gwinnett County, Georgia. This is about 30 miles northeast of Atlanta. The business is plant brokerage, plant, and sod distribution. We grow some plants we have not had in adequate supply or that need to be grown in or near our climate. This also evens out seasonal labor requirements and provides a method for keeping high-quality people employed.

We have to think WEATHER in everything we do in our area. Our winter temperatures have dropped as much as 70° to 80°F overnight and to lows of 8° to 12°F. The cold-damage risk is high when we have trees and shrubs that are unprotected. So we spend a lot of time and money on winter protection. Our annual dilemma is that our ideal stocking time is from February 15 through March 15. If we stock earlier, we worry about cold damage; if we stock later, growth is beginning. If it is too wet for growers to harvest during that 30 days, we may not get our orders. If we bring in plants from a warmer climate, we have to make sure the timing is right. The demand for trees and plants out of season has grown rapidly in the past 10 years.

My first mechanical harvesting experience was with a Jiffy Baller, and the lasting impression from that was, "there has got to be a better way."

When we learned about root control bags, we began to see them as a way to help solve many of our problems and offer some additional advantages as well:

1. Better inventory control by having more windows of harvest and, therefore, better utilization of space.
2. Less freeze damage by having a partial supply close by with root systems below ground and protected. These could be harvested quickly and in weather that might not allow hand or machine digging.
3. Improved display areas due to flat-bottomed balls that stand up better than cone-shaped balls.
4. More accessible product compared to a container that would also offer soil-to-soil rather than soil-medium to soil relationship. This, along with a good fibrous root system, should improve plant survival.
5. Plants would have adequate root balls with less weight to

transport and handle than conventional ball and burlap.

6. One big advantage to me is not having to have a 6- by 10-ft. access to each plant in order to harvest it. Every other tree can be harvested from a block and still leave the block full of quality trees for this season's harvest.

Three years ago we expanded our operation to our family farm near Augusta, Georgia, which is 120 miles east of our present location. Utilizing the equipment that we had, including cable-tow overhead irrigation, we installed 25,000 root-control bags in an intensive planting. This was repeated the last two years.

Planting and growing was accomplished pretty much as expected. This is like container production in that most of the cost is up front, so having replacement plants ready to go is important to make sure that you can utilize your investment. In some plantings we alternated bag sizes so that we could harvest every other plant and leave the rest to go to a larger size.

Root-control bag trees can be dug with a man on each side at the rate of one per two minutes. It takes a few more minutes to repair and lace the top before transporting. We have been able to harvest when temperatures were near 100°F with no plant damage.

The major problem that we have is roots escaping where the plastic bottom is sewn to the fabric. This has contributed to varying success with our summer digging. Basically plants with good root containment harvest well and those with poor containment harvest poorly. Plants that were pregrown in containers have better containment.

We are looking forward to trying the new-model bag with the plastic bottom glued in. We think this will solve the containment problem.

One important thing in marketing is to make sure that the root-control bag is removed when planting. We let our customers know with a computer-printed note on each invoice, a tag on each plant, and by a verbal reminder from each sales person. The procedure for removing the bag is on the tag and is pointed out by each sales person.

Which growing method is best? Each method has its advantages and disadvantages. The advantages that we see, in our infant stage of experience, make root-control bags a visible part of our future.

The customer will ultimately determine the success of this growing method based on his ability to profit from this product.

We feel that the method can be profitable to us, so we want to make sure the customer gets a quality product and understands how to remove the bag and plant profitably.