



Wilson's Nursery



Connie's Corner

Becoming

by Connie Kratzke

As you may have heard, I am in the process of becoming our grower here at Wilson's. That evolution is contingent upon the development of a fully functional fulfillment team. We're almost there! Luis and Julio joined us this year and I could not be more impressed with their performance. They are phenomenal human beings and I am honored to have them on the team that will soon be theirs. Luis previously worked for Green Circle Growers in Ohio, producing tropicals, orchids and succulents in a state-of-the-art facility. Julio worked for Flowerwood Nursery in Alabama. With locations in Georgia and Florida as well, Flowerwood has over 1,000 acres in production and 600 employees. We were lucky enough to find these guys through LaborMex Staffing after struggling for a couple of years to find and retain the right people for the stressful, physical gig of pulling orders. We were also blessed to find Logan Meyer domestically. This was his first year at Carlson School of Management and he plans to return next summer. Logan is a natural leader who loves working physically outdoors. Paired with veteran puller, Sam Shipler, he learned quickly and reached for the reins. I have no doubt he'll do big things. Sam probably won't return next spring, as he

will be finished with the Non-Destructive Testing program at Ridgewater. That said, it doesn't hurt to hope. Sam is a fantastic young man with great attention to detail and a calm demeanor that sets the tone for everyone around him. I have been lucky to work with numerous rising stars during my time at Wilson's and I am always sad when they move on.

Now I am faced with the task of analyzing the grower role and what that looks like for me and this company. Obviously, imagination is the only limitation. There are countless things to scrutinize and obsess over, so I should do just fine if I can reign in my OCD.

What I am most interested in tackling first is tree pruning and training. Our field crew does a tremendous job. The tree to human ratio is just a bit unfair. Lack of personnel during the winter months also presents challenges. Dormant season pruning just hasn't been possible. This year I plan to spend a good portion of the winter torturing my hands and I couldn't be happier! Very genuinely, there is no task I enjoy more than shaping trees and correcting flaws. Both immediate and delayed gratification are my rewards.

Staking is another matter that needs attention. Goodness knows we do our best. Two, hard-working guys focus on staking almost every day; attempting to keep our trees straight and stable. What we need to work on a bit are method and timing. Some trees go wonky faster than others. Growth rate plays a big role. Left to their own devices, Birch trunks twist and cross. Pine leaders fight for dominance. Hackberries rule by committee. Stakes are not a long-term solution and have been proven to have some detrimental effects. That said, they are mandatory for producing straight trees in wind-blown, Midwestern fields. In crowded production areas like our pads, branches grow towards the light. Seemingly simple things, such as positioning the tallest trees north of the shortest trees can pose significant, logistical challenges. Winter is a great time to ponder, discuss and plan our attack.

Scheduling production tasks is going to be my main focus this winter. Our field and container production crews know what they have to get done and have a solid plan. That said, day-to-day necessities redirect and interfere with their timeline. Now I'm going to further complicate things by nit picking. Pruning is always difficult to schedule because ideally, the majority of it should be done during the dormant season. Reality throws a wrench in that. Therefore, we have to look at the next best times while minimizing risks. Our spading timeline is dictated by Mother Nature, yet numerous other tasks are best accomplished during the same window. What gives? What can't wait? Sometimes FAFO is the only way to go, but quality time spent weighing risks and benefits is less traumatic in the long run.

Tremendous growth and expansion mandate a higher level of organization. That's really what I excel at. The challenge is improving quality with respect and compassion for the folks who are out there every day doing their best. Assuming that one's own priorities are paramount is the best way to fail. Communication is essential. With that in mind, I am taking an online, agriculture/horticulture relevant Spanish class from Rutgers this January. Andy is taking it too. In order to provide constructive criticism and instruction that don't result in resentment, I must be able to model and demonstrate. I speak enough Spanish to be confusing. Hopefully this course will bring clarity to my conversations with the indispensable people who have boots on the ground.

Obviously, there are pests and diseases and weeds and critters...oh my! Overwhelming myself with a plethora of problems won't help, though. I need to be able to view the panorama through filters of urgency without donning blinders. My peripheral vision must stay tracked on the big picture. My hope is, quality improvement efforts will be apparent in some way. While that's vague, I recognize the scope of what I have gotten myself

into. Please let me know what I can do better. When products go out that miss the mark, I want to hear about it. Our fulfillment crew does an excellent job of selecting good quality plant materials, but sometimes they are forced to tread water in a murky pool. I'm going to shock that sucker!

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