

The debate concerning the value of third-party certification that began a few years ago continues to confound and divide industry participants regardless of size or segment.

Sustainability and Certification in Horticulture

By Jim Snyder

Although other industries — fisheries and timber in the 1980s and food processors in the late 1990s — have sustainable protocols in place, floriculture has only recently begun to explore this topic. The initial interest was propagated by Walmart's early eco-friendly initiatives, particularly towards vendors, and furthered by the process to establish a National Agricultural Sustainability Standard (still continuing) and the evolution of Walmart's efforts into the creation of The Sustainability Consortium (www.sustainabilityconsortium.org). The consortium is charged with creating a protocol to establish a sustainability index (rating) for any product manufactured or grown. Eventually this rating will appear on products at retail allowing the consumer to gauge the sustainability of competing items as they make a purchase decision.

Defining Sustainability

Before proceeding, let's review a few items, the first being the definition of sustainability. Sustainability is the ability to continually repeat the processes necessary to create goods and services while having the least possible impact on the environment. To do this a business must produce a safe and reliable product that meets customers' expectations, at a profit that allows the business to continue, all while using actions that have as little negative environmental impact as possible. Although the terms are sometimes used interchangeably, sustainability is not the same as organic, eco-friendly, green, earth friendly, natural, pesticide-free, etc.

Secondly, at this point in time, sustainable initiatives in floriculture are completely voluntary. No regulatory agency requires them and as yet, no customers at any level have made them a necessity to do business. Thirdly, sustainable actions are very

specific to an individual business's circumstances. What may be a sustainable initiative for one business may not be a sustainable initiative for another. Fourth, embracing and implementing sustainable initiatives is a strategic rather than operational action. Sustainability becomes a business philosophy that transcends operational parameters and becomes the core motivation for all business decisions for each and every operational department without exception. Finally, not every "eco-friendly" action is automatically a sustainable action. For example, some very environmentally friendly production practices might result in a finished product that can't command an adequate price (profit) or fails to meet customers expectations resulting in a product that is unsalable or not saleable at an adequate price level. While the action is very friendly to the environment, it would not qualify as a sustainable action.

World Class Breeding



Lobelia NAUTICA™



Calibrachoa CATWALK™



Verbena ESPADRILLE™



Petunia PERFECTUNIA™



Mandevilla PERGOLA™



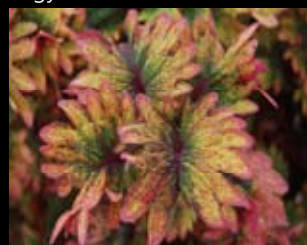
Argyranthemum DRESS UP™



Lantana SOUTH BEACH™



Petunia PANACHE™



Coleus SIGNATURE™



Calibrachoa KIMONO™ 'Hot Pink'

The Only Genetics Exclusive To The IGC.

Looking for a brand to help your business succeed?

Hort Couture offers extensively trialed new genetics that are from the finest breeders around the world.

Quality cuttings available from **Floraplant** and perfect liners grown by **C. Raker & Sons** will give you the right start to successfully grow our gorgeous varieties.



Hort Couture®

www.hortcoutureplants.com

866.955.HORT

Write in 777

Sustainability is the ability to continually repeat the processes necessary to create goods and services while having the least possible impact on the environment.

Formalize an Action Plan

That said, one would be led to believe that floricultural businesses are late to the sustainability party and trail other agricultural and manufacturing entities in implementing sustainable practices. This is certainly not the case. Each and every ornamental plant producer has numerous, and in many cases sophisticated, sustainable practices in place and have had for quite sometime. Where floriculture is late is in formalizing and quantifying sustainable actions. Once you analyze most of the business and production practices employed in modern floricultural, it is surprising the scope and depth of everyday actions that qualify as sustainable actions. Every facility is intent on reducing energy and water consumption, waste, and pesticide use, along with any action that increases efficiency and reduces costs. Granted the motivation for these actions has almost always been cost reduction or increased efficiency, usually under the lean flow process. Nonetheless they are excellent elements contributing to the overall improvement in the sustainability of the business.

One other emerging aspect of quantifying sustainable actions is the potential use of this information as a means to differentiate and add value to your products particularly at the retail level. Consumers are increasingly using the aspect of product safety and eco-friendliness in making a purchase decision for food products. This is now starting to spill over to other products including ornamental plants and will become an important marketing tool at all levels as the Sustainability Consortium completes their task and the sustainability index is adopted.

Why Certify?

Now to the topic of sustainability certification. First a definition: Certification constitutes the adherence to a set of specific operating procedures as defined by an accepted standard with conformance verified by an independent third party. If adopting sustainable actions is the right thing to do for your business, customers, employees and heirs, and we already have in place many extensive sustainable actions, why consider certification? Simply put, certification validates your sustainability claims, eliminates the possibility of “green washing,” and provides an organized and focused process to refine and increase the sustainability of your business.

In the context of today’s economy this may not seem like a major justification for the expenditures necessary to undergo the certification process. Firstly, the process is not overly difficult, time consuming or hugely expensive. Secondly, cost will only increase overtime. Thirdly, adopting certification now will provide a strategic operating and promotional advantage over competitors who delay adaptation. Finally, obtaining certification and the resulting refinement in sustainable initiatives should have a positive effect on your sustainability index (rating) emanating from the Sustainability Consortiums mission.

Now to the difficult question, which standard is right for your business? At last count there are 30+ sustainability and related certifications available worldwide to agricultural operations. Eliminating timber, fisheries and food processing, some are more orientated to cut flower producers, some to vegetable or grain producers or general agriculture. None of these standards are bad or inadequate — just different. Keeping

in mind the ornamental plant producer (cut, pot, nursery, bedding, annual, perennial, young plants) and within North America, the following standards (in no order and without endorsement) would seem to be most appropriate. The definitions are capsulated and you are encouraged to investigate each thoroughly before forming an opinion.

MPS: Developed in the Netherlands to reduce the impact of floriculture on the environment, it is now available worldwide. MPS includes three levels of achievement and analyzes a grower's energy, water and pesticide use along with waste disposal.

VeriFlora: Developed specifically for all ornamental plants, VeriFlora quantifies the input use of production elements, ecosystem protection, emission and waste disposal along with fair labor practices and community responsibility.

GAP/Global GAP: Stands for "Good Agricultural Practices" and applies to producers of any agricultural products. GAP is extensively used in vegetable production and recognized by the grocery industry. It may have application for ornamental producers who market extensively to supermarkets and grocery.

NOP: Stands for National Organic Program and was developed by USDA. It's not really a sustainability standard but important for vegetable and herb producers and for those who market to entities like Whole Foods and others who promote organic, natural or pesticide-free products.

Rain Forest Alliance: One of the first "sustainability standards," it began in 1989. The alliance works to conserve biodiversity and ensure sustainable livelihoods by transforming land use practices, business practices and consumer behavior. It was recognized by some retailers who were the first to encourage vendors to attain sustainability certification and may be advantageous to ornamental producers who market to this group.

As mentioned, there are many standards and production protocols available to ornamental plant producers. Adaptation of a specific certification is a very individual decision and solely

dependent on your unique set of circumstances. What is right for you may not be right for your neighbor or competitor. While embracing sustainability now and implementing sustainable business actions is unquestionably the right course for any ornamental plant producer, the path you

choose to accomplish this can vary greatly from business to business. ☒

Jim Snyder is president of Sustainability Services. He can be reached at 440.319.7230 or snyderjim@windstream.net.



Tom takes his family fishing.
What will you do with the time the AutoFog saves you?

AutoFog

Spraying made automatic, safe & effective



Small



Medium



Large



Extra Large

**Dramm has an Autofog for every size greenhouse.
Call to find out which one is right for you.**

DRAMM
Integrated Plant Health
information@dramm.com
www.dramm.com
920.684.0227