

How Are You Using the

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INTERNET?



Growers have found using the internet for both production and marketing purposes can save them time and money.

BY DAVID KUACK

When it comes to the internet, how you are using it for your company? A lot of people use it for social media, but growers are finding ways that it can save them time and money and be a good way to promote their companies.

Doug Cole, owner and president at D.S. Cole Growers Inc. in Loudon, N.H., is a wholesale grower who produces both starter and finished plants.

“We are definitely focused on young plants,” Cole says. “About 75 percent of our sales are starter material and the other 25 percent are finished plants. Our 5 acres of greenhouses are full year-round with something.

“We sell all of our starter plants through brokers. We sell some of the finished plants through our own garden center, but most of the plants are sold to independent garden centers and supermarkets in the Northeast.”

Takao Nursery continues to collect and evaluate new plants to expand its product offerings.

Shown: *Salvia spathacea*, common name California hummingbird sage.

(Photo: Takao Nursery)

ORDERING VEGETATIVE CUTTINGS ONLINE

When it comes to buying most of the vegetative cuttings his company is propagating, Cole orders from the breeder farm websites or sends emails.

"We use both methods; it depends on the supplier," he says. "For the bigger breeding companies we use their websites. They have a portal setup, and we purchase the cuttings that way. Probably about 70 percent of the cuttings that we root are ordered on the breeding companies' portals."

"For most of the product that we order, we do it online," he says. "We don't pick up the phone very often. When it comes to the larger breeding companies like Ball FloraPlant, Syngenta, Selecta, Dümmer and Danziger, we are receiving cuttings to stick every week from December through March. It just depends on whether it's 100 cuttings or 1,000 cuttings. We have 1,000 line items; most of them are plants that we stick weekly to meet an exact rooting schedule. Receiving cuttings on a weekly basis, the online ordering has made it very simple."

Cole says for some breeders instead of using their online ordering system, his company is linked directly to their farm availability.

"For example, our availability shows the exact same availability for the season at Syngenta that is seen on its site," he explains. "When a liner order is booked in our system for a customer, our system automatically sends the order directly to Syngenta to reserve the cuttings for the appropriate stick date. At the same time, those cuttings are automatically depleted from the Syngenta farm availability for the given week. No person is involved in this process."

Cole says none of the tissue culture labs he is working with have an online ordering system. "When I'm dealing with a tissue culture lab I may only purchase four items from that lab in four different shipments. In that case, sending emails is not that big a deal."

He says his customers can see his company's entire availability product list on its website.

"In October growers can see the thousands of trays of product available from the breeding companies during January, February and March. Our availability list online is strictly to look at what we offer. No one orders anything directly from

our availability list."

Cole says growers who call about ordering rooted cuttings are directed to contact the broker of their choice to place an order.

"We don't have it set up so that the growers can go to our website, look at the availability

list and then order the product from a broker," he says. "We hope that when the growers see the product on our availability list and contact their brokers to order the plants that they are asking that the order be filled through us."

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Danny Takao (right), his wife, Renu (center) and daughter Lisa Takao-McCall are using Instagram to share information with customers including future new plants, current availability and why their company's products are different. (Photo: Takao Nursery)



With its 120,000 square feet of controlled environment structures, Takao Nursery has started to look at plants other than drought-tolerant natives. (Photo: Takao Nursery)



Online ordering has simplified the process for D.S. Cole Growers to track the cuttings it is sticking on a weekly basis. (Photo: D.S. Cole Growers)

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The internet has made it easier for Doug Cole at D.S. Cole Growers to manage inventory control of the vegetative starter plants he sells through brokers. (Photo: D.S. Cole Growers)

OTHER INTERNET USES

Cole also uses the internet to submit data for some of the programs his company is involved with related to sustainability and product export. D.S. Cole Growers has participated in the More Profitable Sustainability (MPS) program for 11 years.

"There is a lot of data that has to be submitted to MPS in order to maintain our sustainability certification," he says. "Also, anything that we do with customs we have to do online before receiving phytosanitary certification. Previously when we shipped cuttings into Canada we'd make a phone call and ask USDA-APHIS officials to come out and do an inspection to receive a phytosanitary certificate."

Cole is now required to work with the Phytosanitary Certificate Issuance & Tracking System (PCIT). PCIT system tracks the inspection of agricultural products and certifies compliance with plant health standards of importing countries.

“We go online and list the product that is going to be shipped the next week,” Cole says. “It is documented on the website so when the inspectors come out to our facility, they have a list of plants and they are able to do their inspection much more quickly. Previously they would just come out and ask what we had for them to look at. Using PCIT may not be faster for us, but it does help the inspectors since we have everything ready for them when they arrive onsite.”

He says some of the equipment used in his operation, including the Priva environmental computer, bench moving equipment and potting robots are accessible through the internet. This allows for service calls to be made from another state or country.

STAYING RELEVANT

Takao Nursery began operating in 1960 in Gardena, California. The wholesale growing operation moved to Fresno, California, in 1979. The company has 120,000 square feet of controlled environment structures and 40,000 square feet of cold frames.

“When the company was in Gardena, we grew primarily ground covers and some bedding plants,” says president and owner Danny Takao. “We continued to grow these crops when we moved to Fresno. In 1995 we began to transition to perennial liner propagation.”

“We were selling the ground covers and bedding plants to mostly nurseries and landscape contractors in the Los Angeles area. The customer base stayed the same even after we moved to Fresno. When we started producing perennial liners our customer base changed to wholesale growers. In 1995 we took a gamble, stopped producing groundcovers and bedding plants and started doing only perennial propagation.”

The perennial liners are sold through brokers throughout the United States with most of the liners being shipped to wholesale growers on the West Coast.

“The market for groundcovers and annuals was becoming oversaturated and the prices for

these products were dropping,” Takao says. “We had to decide if we were going to change to another crop or get out of the business altogether. When we first started producing the liners most of the production was shipped to northern California

growers. From there, the business expanded as we picked up more brokers.”

DOING SOMETHING DIFFERENT

When the economy started to suffer in 2008, Takao Nursery

had already begun looking at what it was going to do next.

“Many of our customers had started looking at buying unrooted perennial cuttings and propagating the plants themselves,” Takao says. “We were trying to decide how we



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could be of value under those circumstances. When the country started coming out of the recession that's when California began to experience four to five years of severe drought. That helped to reinforce the point of trying to do something different."

"We were looking at native California plants. But we also started to collect plants from the Mediterranean, Australia, anywhere the climate is dry and rain is sporadic. That started in 2008 and then in 2012 we really accelerated the collection of plant

material. It's an ongoing process, including doing evaluations."

EDUCATING GROWERS

As Takao Nursery's product mix continues to evolve, Danny's daughter Lisa Takao-McCall, who is director of operations, is

working to ensure growers know what products are available from the company and how to use them.

"Through our website and Instagram, we are working to reach our customers on a more direct level where we can get our brand message to them," Takao-McCall says. "Instagram has been a great tool to do this as it is very visual and a space where many people are already frequently on. It's helping us to reach both current and new customers allowing us to share information including future new plants, current availability, why our products are different/better and behind the scenes. Since we work through a network of brokers, we may never meet many of our customers. The internet is a great way to reach out to customers in order to form a more personal relationship despite having never met them in person."

Takao-McCall plans to use Instagram more. The internet has enabled her to research the best ways to use Instagram, including image editing apps, hashtag information, writing compelling captions/topics, best types of imagery to gain interaction and organizing grid look.

"We have seen direct results from promoting our company on Instagram," she says. "Customers have mentioned seeing plants on our Instagram account and want to place an order. There are also new customers who have discovered us through Instagram. The cost to have an account is free. It's been the best bang for our buck."

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Takao Nursery: 559.275.3844; info@takaonursery.com; www.takaonursery.com; www.instagram.com/takaonursery. [gpn](#)

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