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From Forest Nursery Notes, Winter 2011

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How Wet Is Wet?: The Art and Science of Watering®

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INTRODUCTION

- The profitability of your business is controlled by the person holding the hose.
- More plants are damaged by incorrect water application than any other thing you do.
- Pesticides compensate for incorrect water application.
- Slow growth, uneven growth rate, reduced quality, and poor post-harvest survival are all signs of incorrect water application.

Watering plants is a core activity in a nursery. Most staff receive training consisting of “go water the plants.” Rarely does a new employee understand the intricacies of when to water, how much to apply or the frequency of application based on plant development and weather conditions. Invariably growers either “figure it out” or become frustrated and quit your company and start the process all over somewhere else. Unfortunately while the growers are “figuring it out” they produce crops that are inconsistent in quality with increased shrink.

Part of the problem with training growers to water correctly and consistently is we use very ambiguous terminology to describe the watering process. “Too wet, too dry, medium wet, medium dry, wetter, drier, spritz, flush, soak, and drench” are all terms used to inform growers what they should be doing. When the growers don’t achieve the desired results, the growers are reprimanded for failing to follow instructions.

How can growers interpret correctly standard watering terms when the managers can’t define the terms? When you compound the ambiguity of the watering terminology with the requirement to modify the frequency and amount of water based on crop development, it is easy to see why growers become confused. As a defensive position, most growers keep the plants on the wet side since they aren’t reprimanded for wet plants, rather just the dry ones! To compensate for excess water, growers apply fungicides to correct the root rot disease! A viscous cycle ensues where keeping the soil too wet requires watering with fungicides to correct the excess watering...

The dilemma for managers is; “How do I train growers to water when I was never trained myself?” The key to training your staff is to break the process down into definable teachable activities and then train the appropriate staff intensively. The watering process is broken down into five different levels of knowledge with each subsequent level of knowledge dependent on a thorough understanding of the previous level.

All employees need to understand “Language of Watering.” This step of the knowledge pyramid involves developing a common terminology so everyone in your organization can communicate the moisture status of the crop. From shipping to growing to pot filling — if the soil is a ‘W2’ — everyone knows what the soil moisture level is and what they need to do about this level based on production protocols.