

EFFECTIVE USE OF COMUTERS Donald J. Kass

Abstract. A computer in the nursery can be an effective, timesaving tool. To achieve this, use "industry standard" software, take advantage of the built-in features of each software package, and carefully select which nursery operations to computerize.

Having a computer at the nursery can be the greatest help or the worst headache you ever had. Like all tools, it depends upon whether you learn to use it properly.

To make the computer a plus instead of a minus, as you get started and comfortable with it, I suggest three things. One, start with "industry standard" software; two, use your software as is with programming kept to a minimum; and three, be very selective on what you decide to do on the computer.

1. USE INDUSTRY STANDARD SOFTWARE

Using industry standard software such as dBase III Plus, Lotus 1,2,3 and others can be very beneficial to you as you begin to use computers in the nursery. Generally speaking, most community colleges offer training in using this popular software. There are also many books available **for both beginners and advanced users.** Most computer magazines also favor this software in their articles and columns. In addition, many third party companies supply programs that can be used with it.

All of this will make it much easier for you and your employees to learn to use the computer. The advantage of using industry standard software is that it is a standard and you can get a lot of information, training and already developed applications for it. Later on, you may find a "clone" or even an entire different software package that has better features and does what you want. By that time, you will be experienced enough to know exactly what you want and what software is best for you.

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2. KEEP PROGRAMMING TO A MINIMUM

When starting out, your goal should be to **use** the computer software as is with little or no programming. The idea is to let the person using the software learn how it operates and what the various commands do. As the person becomes more familiar with the program, programming can then be used to save time by automating competitive or multistep tasks.

I realize that this is just the opposite of how it usually happens. Normally, the operator is given a program that someone else has written to do a particular job. Naturally, when you try to use the program, it freezes up and the operator has no idea of what to do next. If the operator is already familiar with the steps the program is carrying out, he has a better chance to fix what may be causing the problem. In the long run, the person will also know the capabilities and limitations of the software program and may discover other situations in which to use it.

3. BE SELECTIVE

Finally, once you have your computer and software and know how to use them, you should be very selective in what you computerize. I suggest you put priority on items that directly fit with the software. For example, summary reports that contain rows and columns of figures that have numerous calculations, subtotals and totals are ideally **suited to a spreadsheet. Budget reports, seedling life history reports, seedling inventory reports, lifting progress reports and year-end statistical summaries are good prospects for a spreadsheet. The added advantage of using a spreadsheet is that you are designing the format of the printed report as you build the rows and columns.**

A database, on the other hand, is good for keeping records. Records that you keep on seed, seedlings, fields, employees and equipment may be best kept in a database. Databases can sort information and let you retrieve information based on the criterion that you select.

I suggest you look at your possible uses of the computer and decide which ones can be set up with a minimum of programming and inputs but yield substantial savings in time and effort. Consider the cost-benefit ratio. Start using the computer for those things where the "cost" is low (i.e., low cost in training time, programming time, or time keying in information) and the "benefits" are relatively high compared to this "cost."

I also suggest you stay away from "complete" programs. An example of a "complete" program may be one that if you

input all your seed data, input all sowing and lifting figures, input all personnel data and budget figures, it would produce all of your summary reports at the end of the year. In my opinion, programs that lock everything together are generally unwieldy, hard to work with, and very hard to modify when someone (and someone always does) wants additional information or another column added to a report.

Try to keep the programs you develop as independent as possible. By all means share information between them so the data doesn't have to be rekeyed. Keep in mind the "cost-benefit" principle. Don't put anymore information into your computer than the bare minimum necessary to get the reports you decide are best done on the computer. Use the computer to help you do the reports and track the data you are presently doing manually if and only if you see a positive "cost-benefit" in doing them on the computer.

In summary then, I suggest three things as you start out: Use industry standard software, keep programming to a minimum, and be selective in what you do with the computer. Even as you progress with your computer, these suggestions should still be pertinent to one degree or another.