

CHARLES SPITZNER NURSERY

Long Island, New York

Making the Switch: An Easy Transition to Mixes with HydraFiber[®] Leads to Success

We all know the old adage, “If it’s not broken, don’t fix it.” All too often we find ourselves in the comfortable lull of the tried and true. Taking the leap to something new can be intimidating, but it’s the root cause of innovation and often the key to success. One person sure to be glad to have taken that leap is Mike Spitzner, manager of Charles Spitzner Nursery on Long Island, New York, a family-owned and -operated wholesale operation specializing in New Guinea Impatiens, Geraniums, Dahlias, and Garden Mums with 120,000 square feet of covered greenhouse space.

Mike had been using traditional pre-made peat/perlite mixes from ASB Greenworld for decades. A couple of years ago, Mike’s ASB Greenworld sales rep, Trina Saxon, sent him information about HydraFiber[®] and suggested he give it a try. Mike recalls his initial reaction: “I was skeptical at first. The information that she sent me sounded good, but I was turned off when I read about changing your watering techniques. It got to the point of wondering if I really wanted to get into that. I’d have to reteach everyone what they’re doing, and if it’s not broken, why fix it? But then I started hearing more about the product. Just by chance, I saw a [video](#) on Facebook with big growers who switched to HydraFiber mixes, and a lot of them had, in their experience, found that they didn’t really have to change much. It was a seamless change.”

Newly encouraged to give it a go, Mike contacted his ASB rep Trina to start a trial. Out of ease of convenience, he started with a mix that ASB had readily available, consisting of 15% HydraFiber and 85% peat. In addition to the trial with the 15:85 mix, Mike also tried a 25:75 blend, as that was equivalent to his existing 25:75 perlite/peat mix. While he liked the 15:85 mix, he liked the 25:75 mix even more.



MIKE SPITZNER EXAMINES THE HEALTHY ROOT SYSTEMS FROM A PLANT GROWN IN A HYDRAFIBER BLEND.

“We instantly noticed that the plants seem to really like it,” says Spitzner. “Two days after transplant you’re already seeing roots entering the new substrate, something that would typically take about four or five days with the perlite and peat-based blends. Plus, we achieved full rooting of the pot size much quicker. In four-inch and six-inch pots using the 30% HydraFiber blend, within a week you have roots to the bottom and edge wall. This is definitely aiding in your early stages of watering; there’s a little bit less that has to be done.”

Spitzner also noticed that his plants stayed green and healthy right after transplanting, whereas he used to see a slight, temporary yellowing when using a peat/perlite mix. He attributes this to the fact that due to the quicker root growth, the plants can grab the nutrients from the new mix quicker.

Asked if in the end he had to make any significant changes to his growing practices, Mike doesn't hesitate: "We didn't have to change much. I like to run the pot filling machine as fast as I can run it, and then I like to come in and plant afterward. When we water in the pots before they plant, typically we would give them a nice dose of watering, and then after planting we would water in pretty heavy. With the HydraFiber mix, we now lightly water before transplant. Instead of heavily watering afterwards, we light to medium water. If it's a hot day, we might have to come in again, or the next day give them a light watering to perk them up. So, in the early stages we're doing just a little bit less watering, only because I found if you watered it too much in that first stage, we could compact the dirt a little more than we wanted to."

Spitzner adds that he also made a few changes to the pot filling process. "You want to have a little more excess on certain size pots because HydraFiber is very fluffy. If you run it too fluffy, then when you water in, you'll get a lot of compression and it looks $\frac{3}{4}$ full instead of full. We adjusted the brush up a little bit and I took the plow off and just have the brush. I found it worked better with it off because when it was on, the fibers would grab together and the plow would actually pull the dirt out of the pot. Our machine is also equipped with a thumb sweep that runs similar to the brush, but it's got paddles on it. A lot of times with the perlite mix blends I never really used that. I've now turned that back on, and it seems to get a little bit more dirt into the pots."

Knowing what he knows now, the only regret Spitzner has is that he didn't trial the HydraFiber mix sooner. His recommendation to other growers is to do a proper

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side-by-side trial, growing half of a crop in HydraFiber mix and the other half in their traditional peat/perlite mix under otherwise identical conditions. The results will speak for themselves.

Asked what pieces of advice he'd give to growers that aren't trialing a HydraFiber blend yet, Mike responds: "I think they're making a mistake; I think they should really be trialing it. In my mind, I think most mixes are going to incorporate some type of HydraFiber content in the future. I think perlite is going to be a bigger issue in terms of supply problems and price. There's a lot of negatives going for perlite at the current moment, and HydraFiber is better. You're getting the same thing you're getting from perlite or vermiculite, but you're also getting more air porosity, more water-holding capacity, and better plant performance, so it really makes sense to switch to a HydraFiber blend."

Our thanks to Mike for talking with us. If you're a grower or blender interested in learning more or starting HydraFiber trials, visit hydrafiber.com or contact us at hydrafiber@profileproducts.com or 800-496-0955.



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