e-GRO Alert

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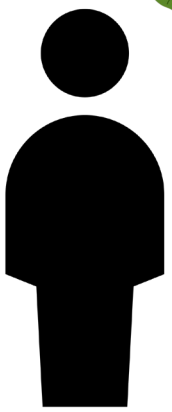
Sanitation: A Culture to be Established & Nurtured

In this Alert, we will discuss why EVERYONE in the company must be involved in the sanitation process.

Sanitation is the process of cleaning an area to protect plant health and staff safety. When sanitation fails, we put at risk the people that work in our operation and the crops that we work so hard to grow.



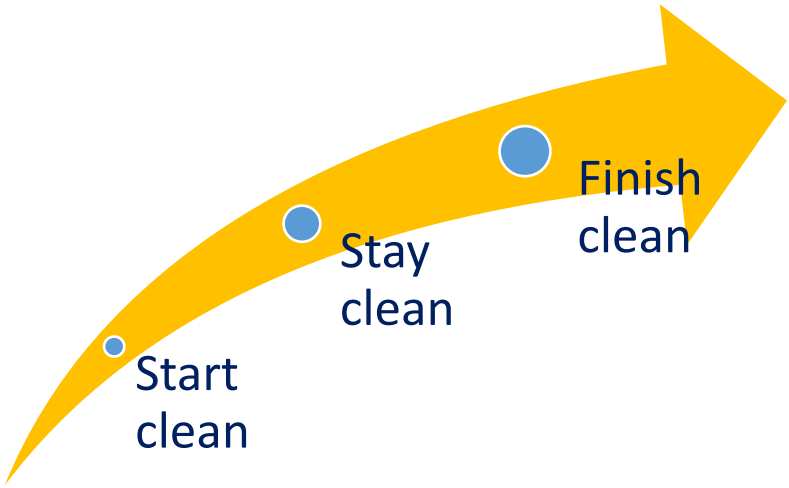
Since sanitation affects all we care about it is important that everyone in the team is on-board and engaged with the process.

In my experience, the best operations have a well-established culture of sanitation. It may look different from operation to operation. However, the one thing they have in common is that is starts from the top of the company and it evolves with the input of the whole team.

This means that the operation's owners and head-growers establish and maintain systems that make it clear that sanitation is a priority, they make it easy for everyone to remember the *why* and the *how*, they are opened to feedback to improve the systems, and they LEAD by EXAMPLE.

Automation is without doubt coming to our industry—whether you are an early adopter of innovations or late adopter, we are heading towards a production system that will use robots more and more. However, the ornamental industry is also an industry that requires a lot of humans to function due to the broad diversity of crops and container sizes. We should automate where feasible but do no disregard that fact that we are an industry that relies heavily on humans.

To establish a culture we need to be clear about the goal. The goal of sanitation is simple:



The reason (the *why*) is also simple: A clean space is a safe space. Per the definition of sanitation, we are talking about plant and human safety. Understanding WHY we do something leads to better engagement in a practice— people remember it and are more likely to do it.

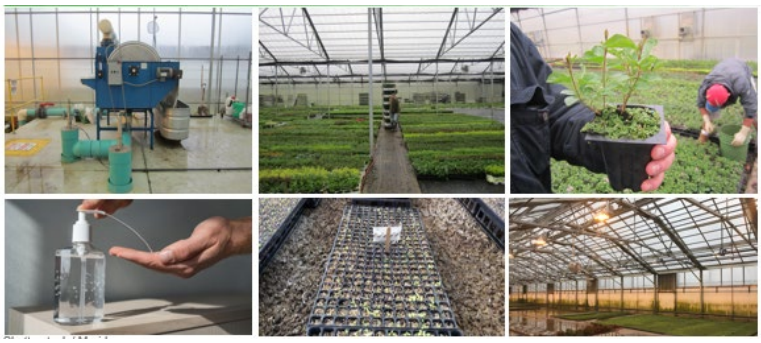
For example, if we can tell the staff that everyone must pick up the hose from the floor, but we do not elaborate on why that matters. A new staff member might not understand why is such a big deal whether the nozzle touches the floor or not. However, if you explain that hose nozzles should not touch the floor because they can become contaminated with waterborne pathogens that then cause plant diseases, they are more likely to remember and do it. You can elaborate that loose hoses on the floor are a trip hazard and that it may result in injury.

Example: On the left, the hose sits on the floor. On the right, the hose hangs and does not touch the floor reducing the risk of contamination and trip hazards.

When training your team, explain that sanitation is a strategy to:

1. Reduce the risk of pests & diseases in the crop.
2. Decrease curative applications of pesticides — which prevents pesticide resistance and reduces staff exposure to agrochemicals.
3. Protect staff from biological, chemical, and physical hazards.
4. Grow high-quality crops.

Therefore, sanitation must occur everywhere in the greenhouse.



The sanitation targets in the greenhouse are:

1. Organic debris
2. Pathogens
3. Pests
4. Algae
5. Weeds

You might ask, how is everyone responsible for these targets. The answer is simple. Anyone involved with purchasing, looking, or touching plants in the greenhouse should have the responsibility. Below are some examples that everyone can follow:

- Everyone who walks in the greenhouse must pull weeds, pick up debris, and enter the production area with clean clothes and shoes.
- Everyone should plan to visit the cleanest section of the operation (ex. propagation house) first and then the *dirtiest* (ex. outdoor nursery).
- Everyone should inspect incoming material (whether you are in purchasing or production).
- Everyone should have some basic training on the signs and symptoms of plant diseases and pests. More importantly, there has to be a mechanism in place where this can be reported or that the staff is allowed to remove or quarantine infected material.

A few final messages:

1. **Let's not confuse the sanitation culture with sanitation standard operating procedures.** Every operation must have dedicated staff who scouts, does preventative agrochemical applications, cleans the surfaces, takes out containers with weeds, etc. on a regular basis. A group of people must be specialized in skills such as pest scouting or testing water in a systematic way. A culture does not mean that because we all do it, no one does it.
2. **Keep realistic expectations.** Staying clean between seasons does not mean that your operation will look as clean as it did at the beginning. Instead, the goal is to maintain a safe level.
3. **Training never ends.** Operation leaders much make sanitation easy to remember and act. This can be achieved with annual training, signs at the doors, color coding, etc.
4. **Good culture is about *cultivating*** an **environment where everyone is responsible and rewarded.** This means that everyone must be heard to make sure processes are improved. The culture is established at the top and *lived* by everyone. A common complaint I hear from staff is that "the top does not get involved or seem to care". I bet owners and head-growers care a lot. I think a lack of communication is the issue. Therefore, create a space and time to get feedback. Those on the battleground are likely to have a good sense of what is missing and how it can be improved.

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