

GREENHOUSE Business™

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How a commitment to product development has helped Growth Products tackle grower challenges

For 20 years Growth Products has directed its attention to the green industry, supplying fertilizers, slow-release liquid nitrogen polymers, chelated micronutrients and organics.

"We can now proudly say that we are represented in all 50 states and sell internationally in 20 countries," stated Clare Reinbergen, President of Growth Products. "Our products cross into many markets, such as golf courses, nurseries, landscape, greenhouse and agriculture. We have earned the reputation of supplying only the highest quality products that are environmentally friendly. And this quality translates into products that consistently perform."

Product development has been at the heart of Growth Products. Started in 1984, with only the concept of one product, a liquid slow-release nitrogen polymer, its R & D chemist Walter J. Hasselman, Jr., took his 20 years of knowledge of industrial resins and began a product line that now encompasses over 40 products. They range from high-concentration liquid nitrogen products such as Nitro-30 (30-0-0) to various NPK analyses and over 10 chelated micronutrients and several complete packages with all minors. The most recent group is the organics, which feature Companion® Biological Fungicide and Essential® Plus, a natural plant and root stimulator.

"The product line grew as we were asked by customers to solve their problems," said Hasselman. The products all have unique properties, such as the Nitro-30, which has no detectable phytotoxicity, the safest nitrogen source (salt index of only 2) on the market. The company's goals have been steadfast over the 20 years: to offer environmentally friendly products with a high standard of performance.

With the full registration of Companion® Biological Fungicide in 2001, Growth Products launched a new product line for the greenhouse market. This was the culmination of five years of field trials at many universities and research centers for disease control on a broad variety of plant materials. Again falling in line with the company's philosophy of environmentally safe products that perform, Companion fit into this criteria. Its active ingredient is a naturally occurring soil bacterium, *Bacillus subtilis* GB03.

"What became evident during Companion's three-year-long registration process with the EPA was a new opportunity," said Reinbergen. "Our market research, found that the Greenhouse market, unlike other markets, was open to new ideas, concepts and new tech-



Images courtesy of Growth Products

GROWTH PRODUCTS PRESIDENT CLARE REINBERGEN VISITS WITH BRUCE HAMMERSMITH, HEAD GROWER FOR SPEEDLING, INC. HAMMERSMITH IS CURRENTLY NURSERY MANAGER AT SKINNER NURSERIES IN BRUNNELL, FLORIDA.

nologies, such as biological controls. We had meetings with growers like Speedling, Yoder and Hines, talking with their head horticulturalist, nursery managers and regulatory people. They all spelled it out clearly, that they were looking for alternatives to chemicals without sacrificing quality!"

Bruce Hammersmith, head grower at Speedling, Inc., said that he was searching for years for biological controls that could replace methyl bromide, offer fungicidal properties without risk of phytotoxicity, and be cost-effective and environmentally friendly. A tall order for any product! The inducement: the onslaught of government regulations, increased social concerns about chemical pesticides, growing popularity of organic farming and increased disease resistance to chemicals. Monrovia, a leading West Coast nursery grower, illustrated the importance of biological controls.

"We try to use as few pesticides as possible without compromising the quality of our products," said John Keller, Monrovia director of research.

Another addition to the horticultural product line is Essential® Plus with a pending OMRI registration. It contains all-natural ingredients that stimulate callus formation and rooting of cuttings. The first trials were held at Yoder's and Essential was found to perform equal to or better than IBA on difficult-to-root Sundance Hibiscus. Another safe alternative for growers.

“It is not just the desire and attitude of our customers, but also the company’s sales team,” states Nicole Campbell, Director of Marketing. “Our sales team is a great combination of backgrounds. They all come from different parts of the industry, which makes for a great technical team. For example, our southeastern technical rep., Randy Oberlander, has over 20 years in the green industry, starting from manufacturing granular fertilizers in East Berlin, Pennsylvania, to now training distributors around the country in the benefits of Growth Products liquids, Essential Plant and Root Stimulator and Companion Biological Fungicide. Randy can spew out application rates faster than you can key them into your calculator and knows chemical pesticide products inside and out. His understanding of their active ingredients and mode of action on diseases is a big help to Randy’s customers. Gary Ackerson works the northeast United States and was a golf course superintendent and constructed golf courses for many years. So we truly have a great melting pot of knowledge.”

One of the company’s true veterans is Keith Giertych from San Jose, California. Keith’s background is horticulture, but he easily works with all market segments from greenhouse growers to farmers. He not only covers the West Coast but also makes frequent treks to Asia to support our customers in Indonesia, Australia, New Zealand and Malaysia. What still amazes Keith is the open-mindedness of his international customers and their continued push with our new products into new markets. If you were to ask Keith what his personal goal is for Growth Products, it would be Companion in the Ag market and organic farming. Through Keith’s efforts, Companion was involved in a large lettuce trial for control of Sclerotinia. Conducted by Pacific Ag Group of San Luis Obispo, California, their preliminary data has Companion outperforming two well-known chemical fungicides in controlling Sclerotinia, a major problem for lettuce growers.

“As we hire new members for our technical support reps, we are looking for an important attribute: be an attentive listener and help solve their problems!” said Reinbergen.

A perfect example is the company’s new south Florida representative Trish Miller. Trish grew up with green thumbs, got her four-year horticultural degree from



GROWTH PRODUCTS TAKES PRIDE IN ITS KNOWLEDGEABLE SALES AND TECHNICAL TEAMS, WHICH INCLUDES SALES REPRESENTATIVE KEITH GIERTYCH, SHOWN HERE AT HINES NURSERY IN VACAVILLE, CALIFORNIA.



TECHNICAL REPRESENTATIVE RANDY OBERLANDER AT RIVERVIEW FLOWER FARM IN RIVERVIEW, FLORIDA.

Michigan State. Since then she has been a grower, buyer and run her own interiorscape company. Trish can listen to the customer because she has had similar experiences and been through the same growing pains. She also knows how concerned growers are about exposure to chemicals (having been there).

“Every day, we are becoming more aware of our customers’ needs for alternatives to potentially hazardous chemicals such as rooting hormones,” said Miller. “They want safe alternatives to chemicals. And everyone is trying to get away from fungicides because of worker exposure and consumer exposure.” On a recent visit to Costa Nurseries Farms, Trish found out that Costa has a scouting department just for biological insects.

Also new to the team is Neil Beatty, Kaukauna, Wisconsin. Formerly with a Growth Products distributor, Neil already knew the added benefits of Companion, which extend beyond just disease control. Customers like C. Raker, are trying to get more “natural” and safe approach to plant health issues. They decided to do a trial on their pansy crop and it gave them excellent results on disease control and healthier plants. They felt that Companion would not only give good, safe disease control but also make a stronger plant to take adverse weather conditions

“No one has a crystal ball,” states Reinbergen, “but when you hear the same sentiments from grower after grower, large to small, and from 20-plus countries, it doesn’t take a rocket scientist to figure it out. Growers are concerned about what they use and the impact it has on themselves and the environment. Now it is our job to prove that natural products such as Companion® and Essential® Plus meet the growers’ benchmark for efficacy on as broad a variety of plant materials and diseases as possible: a major challenge. We already have a stack of trial data from over 25 different universities, research groups and notable growers who insist on doing their own trial work. It is one thing to say that you have a good product, but when a grower sees for himself better results than he expected, that makes your day!

“I think the concept that a natural material such as Companion® and Essential® Plus can outperform chemicals is still baffling to many growers. If you only keep in mind that nature – which developed biological controls over billions of years through survival, selection and success, and is still working everyday to shape our environment – you will understand the power of these bugs!”