

Time Management in the Nursery

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There are five kinds of resources that all nursery businesses manage: people, space, materials, money and time. Time is the most important of these and it is the only one of the five that is irreversible. It is also the resource that is most neglected. Success of the nursery is greatly influenced by how you manage your time.

The Problem

The nursery industry is primarily composed of “Mom and Pop” operations. Many operations evolve from an individual’s love of plants and the desire to make a career from a hobby. Some are looking for the American dream of owning their own business and being able to work side by side with their families. Some are trying to get away from the rigid structure of an 8:00 to 5:00 job.

Others see an opportunity for easy money while sitting back and watching the plants grow and listening to the cash register sing. (Unfortunately, there are too many with this notion.) The first year is consumed with the hard work of laying out the nursery, building, propagating plant material and many other tasks. Things appear to be going as planned.

During the second or third year, everything explodes. Thousands of cuttings which were stuck the previous year now need to be potted into one gallon containers. Gallon plants need to be shifted up and container areas need to be developed to accommodate the explosion of plants. Sales, marketing and shipping come into play. Weeds, diseases and insects have invaded the nursery. Additional labor has been hired with all those associated problems, and the government is pressing for mandatory paperwork.

What started out s a wonderful dream is now a demanding 24 hour-a-day ulcer. What used to be time spent enjoying the wonders of nature is now spent coordinating resources. Time spent going to little league games, fishing, PTA and dance recitals has given way to filling orders, taking inventory and preparing catalogues for upcoming trade shows. Effective time management practices offer an avenue to run a successful business, as well as staying involved in other important areas of your life.

Establishing a Time Management Program

Time management is the process of establishing goals, giving those goals priorities and estimating and allocating the time necessary to meet those goals.

Everyone manages time to some degree. However, in order to be a successful time manager, you must make a commitment to change current management techniques and determine how to better utilize the limited time available.

Time Management is a Habit

The manner in which you manage time is a behavior – a habitual behavior just like the time and frequency you eat, drink or sleep. Like any other habit, it is difficult to change. You must have a desire and be committed to change.

Sometimes, simply monitoring and recording the way you use your time during the day is enough to see how much time is wasted and provide sufficient incentive to change. This is the first action towards change. After recording how you waste time, the next step is to set some realistic goals on how to more effectively use your time.

Setting Goals

Too few people take time to discuss setting goals and explore what is important in their lives. Fewer actually write down these ideas and develop goals to keep or attain the things that are special to them. Established goals are usually directed toward their professional or business lives only. Many other aspects of life are also important, and each area should be evaluated for its relative importance.

Aspects which deserve special attention include: personal life, family and spiritual life, community life, planning for retirement and physical and mental health aspects to living. Goals should not only be established for the immediate future (short term goals), but also for the distant future as well (long term goals). What do you want for yourself, your family and business in the next ten years? There are often conflicts in achieving the desired goals in all these areas. Recognizing these potential conflicts through the time management planning process helps avoid major problems.

The secret to success (as defined by the individual) is to consider all the aspects of living, write down goals for each one, prioritize these goals and strike a balance among them. Success is often defined as the progressive achievement of a worthy goal. The successful nursery manager decides what is a worthy goal and then formulates steps or progressive goals necessary to achieve that goal.

Establish Progressive Steps to the Goal

Excitement comes from the smaller successes toward achieving a major goal and not necessarily the major goal itself. The nursery manager may set a goal of having the nursery profitable by the third year. There is a celebration when the nursery reaches the black on the accounting statement.

However, new plans are frequently formulated immediately for obtaining the next level. The fun and excitement is in reaching progressive steps toward the goal. This is similar to the march toward a national football or basketball championship. Each victory heightens the anticipation and excitement of achieving the final goal. The excitement in reaching the goal is short-lived. As soon as each goal is reached, new goals are set for next season.

Expect Backslides

While you should be confident of success, you should also be expecting backslides. A worthy goal often selected by a competent nursery manager is to maintain good records.

However, the first time things get hectic and spraying, fertilization or propagation data are not recorded, the idea is often given up as unworkable. Consider these moments of confusion or loss of control as one slip closer to reaching your goals. Future backslides will be fewer and farther between. Do not abandon a worthy goal due to one backslide.

Anyone can become a good time manager. However, there must be commitment to change, goals must be set, and the means of achieving those goals must be established and backslides must be seen as a normal occurrence in the process of achieving the desired results.

Tools for Good Time Management

A common thread in any time management program is to "Make a List of Things to Do." The business will run smoother. This one practice alone will make your life easier. However, there is an art to making lists. Many people starting lists for the first time include every little thing that needs to be done for the next five years.

This is fine. However, if planning stops here, the list becomes overwhelming and the manager reverts (backslides) to a management crisis style of business. This style of management is demonstrated by the nursery producer who tries to control a weed problem after the weeds have hidden all the shrubs or clean up the propagation bench after half the plants have died due to disease.

Establish Priorities

After the list is developed, the next step is to rank the tasks in order of importance. Nursery managers should select the activity which will give the most return for the time invested and concentrate their efforts on these activities.

One rule often discussed in the literature on time management is the 80/20 Rule. This simply means that 80 percent of the benefits come from 20 percent of the efforts.

Eighty percent of all nursery sales come from 20 percent of the plants on inventory. Eighty percent of sales come from 20 percent of the customers. On the other end of the scale, 80 percent of troubles come from 20 percent of employees.

This may be a little off, but no matter whether the rule is 90/10 or 70/30, there are some activities in which a high return is received for the time invested. Discover these activities and label them as high priority activities ("A" activities). Activities which yield only small benefits for the time invested should be labeled low priority activities ("C" activities). Some of these time consuming, low return activities could possibly be

eliminated or delegated to lower cost employees. Concentrate efforts on jobs which return the greatest benefits.

Make two lists, using as headings “A Activities” and “C Activities.” “A” tasks are ones that must be completed immediately and “C” tasks are those that can wait or will possibly go away by themselves. Leaving out the “B tasks” forces the manager to decide what is or is not important at a particular moment in time.

One way to determine the degree of importance is to ask the question, “What will happen if this task is not done today?” If a preemergence herbicide is not sprayed this week, will it cost the nursery another \$1,000 to use a postemergence herbicide and labor to hoe around the trees (an “A” task? The loading dock needs to be repaired, but no shipping is scheduled for two weeks (a “C” task). A “C” task today may become an “A” task tomorrow.

The list must be constantly reviewed and updated. The main advantage in making lists is to reduce the amount of anxiety that builds up in trying to remember all the things that need to be done. Lists allow the manager to be more effective in identifying potential problem areas and to organize and coordinate resources to cope before they arise or become overwhelming.

How Much Time is Needed to Do the Job?

Allocate no more time to a particular job than it warrants. Apply a basic principle in economics called the law of diminishing returns. There is a point at which very little benefit is returned for the time and effort expended.

For example, if a nursery producer grows a block of trees with no fertilizer added and then decides to add 100 pounds of nitrogen per acre, he or she would see a large increase in growth. If another 50 pounds were added, there might be a small increase in growth. However, if 50 more pounds of nitrogen were added, the chances are the trees would realize very little benefit from the additional fertilizer. It is possible to spend too much time or other resources on a job.

Delegate (Let Someone else do it!)

When reviewing lists of things to do, the nursery manager should always keep in mind who is the best person to do the job and how much time will it take to complete. A common quote regarding time management is: “Never put off until tomorrow what can be delegated today.” Know each employee’s talents. Allow him/her to use these talents and to grow as an important employee of the nursery.

Morning Person vs. Night Person

Make a list of things that require personal attention and decide the best time to do each task. Most people have a time of the day when they are more alert and productive.

An individual who is a “morning person” should schedule tasks that are the most demanding during early morning hours and vice-a-versa for the “night or afternoon

person.” Thinking and planning are among the most difficult management tasks, and should be handled during the most productive hours. Results of efforts on lesser activities (“C” tasks) come quicker and easier than those requiring more thought. You “feel” you are more productive. The tendency is to do these jobs that show immediate results. A good time manager must learn to concentrate on the “A” tasks first.

Divide the Day into Shorter Segments

Americans are often criticized for always being in a hurry. However, one of the reasons for the success of American industry is the ability of managers to break down their day into shorter segments and plan to get something done within each time frame.

Generally, managers in some countries in South America and elsewhere break their day into morning and afternoon time slots, while Americans divide their days into early morning, before lunch, after lunch and late afternoon segments. The practice of further partitioning the day into one or two hour segments allow the nursery manager to accomplish more.

This practice should not be envisioned as the hair pulling, anxious business manager with the watch alarm beeping every fifteen minutes. Picture instead an organized manager who has time to devote to other important aspects of life such as family, health, social, etc. The goal of time management for many individuals is to be able to efficiently and effectively use time for a better balanced and happier life.

Efficiency vs. Effectiveness

There is a difference between efficiency and effectiveness. A manager needs to be and is paid to be effective. Efficiency in the nursery is demonstrated by the employee who can stick the most cuttings, bud the most trees or load the most plants in day.

Effectiveness involves identifying the most important jobs in the nursery which bring in the most profits for the time and other resources invested. This involves thinking and planning. It is very important that time be set aside for those activities which promote effectiveness.

Problem Areas for Time Management in the Nursery

Handling Paperwork

Handling paperwork is an irritation in any profession, but is a special pet peeve of a nursery manager. One notion often suggested is that a piece of paper should be handled just once and never again. This is not practical. However, two times should be the limit in most cases. There are four options for handling a piece of mail or paper that lands on the manager’s desk:

- 1) **Trash It.** There are many advertisements and pieces of junk mail which cross the desk that should not be given the time required to break the seal.

2) **Take Immediate Action.** Read enough to know what needs to be done. Do the job immediately or write down what needs to be done. Establish a list of things to do. Also, write the date due and the estimated time required to complete the job. Put the paper aside until the time is scheduled to do the job.

3) **Delegate.** Read enough to know who in the nursery can best handle the request or task and pass it on.

4) **File It.** Use a simple filing system to place information where it can be easily retrieved for future reference.

It is not necessary to be a neat person to efficiently handle paperwork. However, it does help to stack clutter and mess out of sight. Clutter on the desk can be a source of anxiety or distraction and serve as a constant reminder of tasks that remain unfinished. Papers stored out-of-sight will not be forgotten since they are all recorded on the list of things to do.

Interruptions

Some people subconsciously enjoy interruptions because they provide excuses for not being able to concentrate on the difficult "A" tasks. Establish a "hideout" which allows adequate uninterrupted time for the task scheduled during that time. Schedule time for making phone calls, opening mail, etc. during the slow time of the day.

Meetings

Meetings can be an effective form of communication in the nursery business. However, they can also be a waste of valuable time. Set strict time limits on meetings. Prior to the meeting, announce what will be discussed or provide a written agenda so that employees will have time to formulate some thoughts and suggestions regarding the topic. It is more productive to schedule several short meetings than one long one.

Procrastination

The major problem associated with time management and faced by almost everyone whether in business or not is procrastination. Jobs are often put off because of a dislike doing them. Another common problem is that the job appears overwhelming. Finally, some individuals, who demand perfection in everything they do, find there is not enough time to do the job as well as they would like.

If the problem is dislike, delegate the job to someone else who may possibly enjoy the opportunity. A retail nursery manager may hate arranging displays, while a talented employee may welcome the challenge. If this option is not available, establish a reward system as an incentive for completing an unpleasant job. Take the afternoon off after an exceptionally unpleasant task and spend the time fishing or on some other rewarding activity. If this is not possible, schedule some time after work to do something special.

An overwhelming job should be broken down into small tasks and depending on the personality of the manager; attack either the hardest or the easiest job first. It is important to break the job down into a manageable size and take the first step.

If you are a perfectionist, remember the principle of diminishing returns and do the best job that can be done under the circumstances. There are many instances in the nursery business where nature does not cooperate with your plans. Try to plan for all possible problems, but accept the fact that it is the nature of the business not to have complete control.

Keeping Up

Keeping up with the industry is very important for the success of the nursery business. New information is constantly made available at association meetings, Extension and research conferences and in scientific journals, trade magazines and Extension publications. It is very important for managers to schedule time for these activities.

Nursery producers often comment that one idea developed at these meetings or from these articles is often enough to save thousands of dollars or at least justify the time spent. Many managers do not allocate time for reading and trade magazines pile up in the corner of the office until they become so overwhelming or outdated that they are finally thrown out.

The RIP/Read rule was devised to resolve this problem. Assign some time every week during the slow part of the day (late afternoon if you are a morning person) to scan magazines and rip out interesting articles and ads to be read at a later date. You can then get the important articles out of the magazines before the job becomes too overwhelming. It is important, however, for you to schedule time to review these articles at a later date. Do not wait until there is a "break". Unless time is specifically scheduled for reading, it will not be available.

The Age of Computers and Electronics

Many electronic devices are available for both large and small nurseries that help managers make better use of their time as well as other resources.

Cell phones, fax machines and answering machines allow managers to be in the field without missing important contacts or sales.

An older tool that can still be of assistance is the micro-cassette recorder. Dictate quick notes on tasks without having to commit them to memory or fumble for a pencil or paper. Take these recorders to trade shows, buying trips or educational field days to make quick notes of plant names, chemicals or other information that takes too much time to write down.

Video recorders may be used to make training tapes for new employees. Your time can then be used for follow-up questions and demonstrations.

To date, the biggest aid available to all nurseries is the computer. Inventory control, catalogue production, payroll, accounting and word processing programs are available.

Summary

Time management is essential to the success of a nursery. If time management is a problem in your nursery, a change is required in behavior along with a strong commitment to change and repeated efforts to establish a habit of effective time management. Expect backslides.

Establish major goals and smaller successive targets. Make a list of things to do. Prioritize this list and concentrate in the activities that give the greatest return.

Allocate time for items on the list.

Delegate as much as possible.

Schedule time for thinking.

Always keep in mind and periodically evaluate your goals and progress.

Keep in perspective the importance of a good balance in all aspects of your life.

Make whatever you do today very special. You gave a day of your life for it.

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