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Effective communication

It is always good to get off the farm. Every time I visit a nursery, I always come back with new ideas and fresh energy.



Ben Verhoeven

Over the next year, I'd like to use this column to share some of those ideas and introduce you to the people who inspired them.

My first foray brings me to the doorstep of **Smith Gardens** in Aurora, Oregon to meet with Lauren Brown, an assistant head grower there. Driving past the orderly rows of plants outside, and a soon-to-be-finished glass house expansion, I park in front of the immense loading dock that is also home to their visitor registration and several offices. "Toto, I've a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore."

Lauren greets me with a smile, and we walk to see an improvement she and her team are excited to share. On the way we talk about her two daughters (one an ace softball player, the other a leadership phenom), and a lot about poinsettias.

Lauren is responsible for a team of section growers and their irrigation staff. She supports them in crop walks and coordinates their tasks with the head grower, the site manager and several other teams.

Poinsettias roll by acre by acre, in large blocks of red and white, at an even height as far as the eye can see. This is no accident, Lauren informs me, and part of it is the result of her team's new improvement.

Through a retractable wall inside the greenhouse is a simple whiteboard with



The boards list insect scouting reports, water quality issues, and general crop quality countermeasures. PHOTO BY BEN VERHOEVEN

powerful ramifications. These area boards started as a way for growers to communicate to site management and owners what they were doing in their crop. They list insect scouting reports, water quality issues, and general crop quality countermeasures.

Originally a suggestion from Andrea Avila-Aragon, the site manager, the growers find them to be so helpful that they have expanded their use. They find it valuable to take information out of a computer and display it right at the crop for all to see.

When the horticulture director comes through in the evening, he sees what is being done to address and preempt problems, leaving notes such as, "Steve was here," and "I like your board!" The area boards help Lauren identify standout crops and support her team, especially in the spring rush. She points out that while it is nice to think you can retain reams of information, "We're human, and this is a live product."

It makes me consider the different ways we think about communication. I used to think communication was confined to what Lauren and I are doing, walking and talking, but she and her team have found that there are other and often more effective ways to easily communicate in the work area.

Visible notes, in a consistent fashion, at the point of use are helping her team grow one of the nicest *Poinsettia* crops this side of the Mississippi. Now that's a note worth taking. ©