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Where the rubber meets the ... bug

It is always good to get off the farm. Every time I visit a nursery, I come back with new ideas and fresh energy. I'd like to use this column to share some of those ideas and introduce you to the people who inspired them.

This is the Greenhouse Issue of *Digger*, so I point the farm truck in the direction of the largest greenhouses in the state (and the 10th largest in the nation): **Woodburn Nursery and Azaleas.**

Pulling into the visitor parking, I see product staged to ship and trains of freshly planted pots moving off to their growing destination. I'm here today to meet with Jim Ellefson, the affable head of their beneficial insect program. He has been in the industry for 50 years and with Woodburn Nursery for 10.

We walk past the office, and into a brightly lit warehouse, filled with neatly racked white buckets and red lids. Each bucket holds a colony of beneficial insects.

Jim and his team have helped grow this program from a few totes tucked under a desk to seven species and over 1,000 acres treated in a single year. Along the way they have seen their sprays go down, their crop quality improve, and their customers happier than ever.

Thrips have always been a major pest here, as I'm sure anyone in the nursery industry can relate. Now, with more beneficial insects on patrol and fewer sprays, they have less pesticide resistant thrips. As Jim puts it, "It's hard for the pest to develop resistance to being eaten."

Jim is excited to show me a simple, but impactful improvement. "The whole thing has been a lot of learning and asking questions," he says. Several years ago, they had an infestation of soldier flies from a neighboring property that were able to find their way not only into the warehouse, but into the sealed buckets.



Jim Ellefson borrowed an idea from the auto industry to provide a cost-effective solution to a problem at Woodburn Nursery and Azaleas. PHOTO BY MARIA CRESPO

Some investigation showed that the original lid gaskets could not withstand their sanitation process. They were degrading and stretching. It was just a fraction of a millimeter, but in the world of insects that's like opening the Trojan gates. Jim tells me that you have to "look at the process, study it, (ask) what's causing it, figure it out."

Frustrated with the cost of new lids, Jim and his team found a simpler solution. They looked to the auto industry and a supplier of bulk rubber cord to make their own durable replacement gaskets. Now, as Jim put it, "Who would have thought that we're in the bug business, but we know rubber!"

It is a good reminder of creativity over capital and how looking for the root cause can lead to simple, impactful improvements; improvements that have helped Jim and his team treat 1,000 acres with beneficial insects. Now that's something to hang your hat on. ☺