

## CONTAINERIZATION VS. BED PRODUCTION OF GROUND COVERS

PETER ORUM

Midwest Groundcovers  
St. Charles, Illinois 60174

We operate in Chicagoland, with rough and cold winters, with or without snow, and long, hot summers, with or without rain. We are propagating, growing and selling ground covers to the landscape contractors and garden centers in this area.

In order that we understand the same thing from the same words I shall define containerization as growing and selling ground covers in some type of container — be it plastic, peat, metal, paper or other. Bed production is growing the ground covers in some type of earthen beds or fields and selling the ground covers bare root or as clumps.

The first and foremost purpose of the undertaking in which we are involved is to make a profit, and we make a profit by solving people's ground cover problems. It gives us the satisfaction of having a utility (of helping to keep the country from eroding away) and doing so on a sound business basis. Ground cover problems can not be solved by handling ground cover plants over a counter or out of a sales yard. Ground cover problems can only be solved by the proper plants taking hold and growing densely to cover the ground; we must assure that this happens.

Since we basically are wholesalers we have two kinds of customers; garden centers and landscape contractors. We must give these people plants that will perform and do the job for their customers. The garden center people must have ground covers that have a reasonably long shelf-life, i.e. ground covers that present themselves and are easy to show to people. Also, these ground covers must lend themselves to some sort of self-service in the garden center, and they must be able to withstand the adverse handling that many customers, despite better advice, will give them. Clearly, a container-grown ground cover is about the only thing that will meet these specifications. Bed-produced, bare-root ground covers will be more dead than alive even before they get out of the garden center. And even fairly good field clumps, packed in some kind of flat or box will have a hard time after 2 weeks in a garden center.

The landscapers are a whole interesting group of their own. One might expect them to be horticulturists like ourselves. That is so in few cases, but more often it is not. In fact, many of them are worse than the garden center customer who buys ground covers. But the landscapers have many problems to struggle with that are

not of their own making. Where the well organized propagator and grower is pretty much in command of things, the landscaper must contend with such things as cement strikes, delayed building schedules, unions, demands to get jobs finished at unreasonable times of the year, and so on.

In the early spring, when he should be planting bare root ground covers he is planting shade trees and shrubs and in July, when it is 100°F he has to finish those ground cover jobs. Most of his laborers do not know half as much about the handling and care of plants as a good gardener. He tries to schedule the planting right but somebody gets drunk, or the water truck breaks down, the Greyhound drivers go on strike, or a thousand other things. They used to say in the Army: "If something can go wrong, it will!", and that is just about how it is.

The landscaper needs relief and that is just what he is getting in container-grown groundcovers. He can plant them any time from the end of winter to the beginning of winter, whether it is 32° or 102°F. He can forget to water them for awhile and they will still make it. He can keep them in his yard or on a job site that did not get prepared on schedule. He can pick them up in the nursery with little or no notice. Or he can get them shipped slow freight and they will still arrive in fine shape.

Bed-produced bare-root ground covers, or even clumps, is no match for these adversities. We still supply bare-root ground covers to some landscapers, especially if we are pinched for potting time, or the landscaper tries to cut the cost. But half of the time something does go wrong.

The use of ground covers has been rising rapidly in our end of the country in recent years. This would not have happened if the ground covers did not perform well on the jobs. And this performance we can, to a large extent, trace directly back to container-grown ground covers.

There is an unsolved problem — the need is there; and there is not much doubt that the need is for container-grown ground covers. So the next step is for the propagator-grower to get cranked up and produce them, but this presents certain problems. The investment in setting up a container production of ground covers is much higher than for bed production. Materials for rooting and growing medium, containers, frames, greenhouses, irrigation systems, covering are all higher. The techniques for rooting a batch of cuttings stuck in pots is not much different than for a batch stuck in a soil frame. But the techniques for growing the plants in these pots or larger pots certainly is much different than for growing in a field bed. Feeding and irrigation are probably the most different. But the advantages of container production of ground covers for the propagator-grower are many. He can stick

and root directly in the selling container if it is relatively small (2-3" pots). The pots can go out of a more expensive propagating frame to a less expensive area as soon as the cuttings are rooted and hardened off a bit, and a new crop can go in. Many more plants per year can be produced per square foot than in the case of bed production. This is especially important if the land is expensive. The problems of shipping are greatly reduced. When the bare-root ground covers or clumps must be dug, counted and packed the container-grown ground covers are there ready to lift out of the frame and load. And if the customer comes a week later than he promised, that is no problem.

Just as the container-grown ground covers gives the user much more flexibility, they give the producer more flexibility. He can pot smaller pots into larger pots at any time during the season and use the right times and the rainy days for bare root potting. He can give his customers instant service any time in the season. And he can be reasonably sure that the ground covers will perform even if the customers only do half of what he told them to do.

There can well be situations even in our area where bed production will be preferred but, given my premises, there is no doubt that the future of success with ground covers is in containers.

MODERATOR CUNNINGHAM: Thank you, Peter. Our last speaker could not be with us. Mr. Dale Chapman from Connecticut has however submitted his paper telling how they handle ground covers and it will appear in the Proceedings. I would like to utilize this time to show you some slides of ground covers and how they are used.

(Editor's Note: Mr. Cunningham showed a series of slides on the use of ground covers along with some comments of do's and don'ts.)