

BONUS #1

FIRST TIME BACKYARD GROWER FAILURES

Mike McGroarty



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Welcome to the fun and exciting business of growing small plants for profit! Enjoy, learn, and prosper.

I wish you incredible success and the best that life has to offer.

-Mike McGroarty

What you'll read in this guide are direct quotes taken from Backyard Grower Business Center members.

There is a wealth of information in the pages that follow.

Years and years worth of failures, mistakes, mishaps, and most importantly... lessons learned the hard way, so you don't have to suffer through the same consequences these other growers did.

Read closely, take notes, and enjoy!

Happy growing!

-Mike McGroarty

Craig O., Paris, TN-

I'm among the newest members and I've already learned something really important: have a plan! This doesn't mean every detail is ironed out but your new fledgling startup needs direction. I started rabidly buying up every stock plant I could find cheap, not really knowing what I was going to do with them. I already see this isn't wise. So I'm not slowing down but am beginning to focus my energy and learning in a more clear direction.

Lori S., Noblesville, IN-

I'll have more later, but I absolutely agree with Craig, first year I just kept buying things. I had no business buying rooted cuttings in the fall, I just didn't have the experience. It's hard, but try to decide if you want to sell wholesale liners, more retail, or wholesale to landscapers, etc.

Mike H., Peterborough, ON-

For me, it was trying to run before I could walk made worse by running off in all directions. As soon as I scaled back and started to focus, things got a great deal better.

Andrae P., Lewisburg, OH-

Where do I start? Believing the weather forecast when they called for rain, so I didn't water plants. Not providing proper overwinter protection for macrophylla hydrangeas (300+ dead in pots...hundreds of \$'s). They must have protection from the drying winter wind if in pots. Reusing potting soil... I think I grew more weeds in some of my pots than actual plants. In the same vein, not applying a pre-emergent because weeds can't be that bad in pots...wrong! Being hesitant about sharing that I grow and sell plants. There are many many more.

Kathleen C., Lebanon, OR-

A biggie for me in the beginning was not getting the right potting medium. I tried to cut corners and ended up with a mix that just didn't produce good roots for me. Not enough bark or perlite/pumice and too much compost. Didn't drain well and rotted a lot of roots. Course we have a lot of rain in my area, so that is an important issue for me. When I did finally find the right mix, what a difference it made for my plants. As the old saying goes, "you get what you pay for". In my case, putting a little more \$\$ into my medium ended up putting a lot more \$\$\$\$\$ in my pocket.

Andrea B., Shelton, WA-

Mistakes? I prefer to think of them as learning opportunities. 😊 Trying to do this on my own instead of jumping right in with the BYG board. There is so much knowledge and experience here that you just can't find in books, other forums, or trial and error. I wish I had started visiting other nurseries earlier. I wish I had gone to a nursery conference earlier. I wish I had found all my wholesale sources earlier. I still like to buy from the board, because some sellers either offer things I can't find elsewhere, sell in smaller quantities so I don't have to meet high minimums, or sell for less than I can find elsewhere. I don't regret any of my purchases, because I learned A LOT about different kinds of plants just by trying to propagate them from URCs and RCs, and also learned a lot about what I'm truly interested in. Reviewing the seller board is also a great way to get a pulse on what's selling. I used too much mushroom compost in my earlier soil mix and killed a lot of plants because of drainage problems. My husband still shakes his head in disbelief at my 95% bark mix, but hey, it works. I also wish I'd used pre-emergent and fertilizer right from the start. I wish I had cleared more space for my plants to begin with. I ended up having to move lots of plants several times. That gets old. I'll probably regret over-wintering so many plants. But apparently my area has cancelled winter, so maybe I'll luck out.

Also, I've been able to make a lot of baby plants through cuttings and divisions, so I don't think I'll have a huge loss, if any. I wish I'd planned for fall and winter sales. I have been able to mitigate that somewhat for Christmas sales. I wish I'd planted more stock plants instead of that blasted corn field. I could go on, but there are also some things I've managed to do right—mostly because of all the advice I've read and received on this board.

John J., Bowling Green, KY-

Definitely not buying and using a pre-emergent – weeds grow like weeds in your pots. And using a peat-based potting soil to overwinter Liriope – too wet – drowned about 20 dozen 😞

Wendy C., Granite Falls, WA-

Thinking permanent markers were permanent/thinking “I'll remember what these are. Tag tag tag. 2. Propagating patented plants(double check!). 3. Not pruning often enough. 4. Under watering. 5. Waiting too long to sell on the Board because I “didn't know how”. 6. Thinking “that's enough cuttings”. 7. Only having one stock plant per variety.

Jonathan S., Mobile, AL-

I kinda laugh when I see all the post. I'm kinda new here myself and I think most everyone can relate to most issues that have been listed above! #1 Wendy mentioned permanent markers! Yea there not permanent!! Every plant that gets potted needs a tag! A good tag and write it in something that will last! #2 pruning I kept seeing everyone talking about pruning. Yea well they were correct! Prune all your plants when they need it! #3 Don't be cheap! I tried rooting cuttings without a mist system. Yes it can be done but if yours serious about growing lots of cuttings Buy a mist system! #4 Take

notes! If you mess up rite it down, if you read something interesting write it down, if you do good write it down! In detail. #5 Don't ever think you have enough cuttings! When you think you have enough! Stick more! I still have lots to learn and it's been alot of fun so far! The BYG board is a huge help!

Rita L., Syracuse, NY-

Where to begin! Have a plan! Have a plan, have a plan! Trying to root cuttings without a mist system~ invest in the mist right from the start before getting any plants. Don't pull cuttings as soon as you do the "tug test" they just might not have enough root system to survive, let them be, let them grow nice and strong root systems, you'll be happier for it and so will the plant! Shade, shade, shade the cuttings you buy in. They've been under shade so keep them in shade until they grow stronger and then acclimate them to sun slowly. Find a great wholesale source for compost and pine bark mulch. I make my own compost, still not enough! Get bypass pruners! Anvil pruners ruin the cuttings, bypass pruners are the way to go. If you grow plants hardy for your zone, you don't need a greenhouse. I grow vegetables and fruits in addition to landscape plants, no greenhouse, start them late winter in basement ~ harden them off slowly to outdoors~ ready for sale by spring. Only take mist down in fall when temperatures are going below freezing, otherwise you'll be watering cuttings by hand ~ yeah this is happening to me now.

Sandra J., Winston Salem, NC-

It seems like I have done all of the above wrong as well. 1. Thinking since I used a good store bought potting soil I would not have weeds...wrong. 2. I placed newly rooted plants in too much sun too soon and they wilted and died. I should have given them gradual sun. 3. I should have listened to the experts sooner when they said plant these as your stock plants and you will get cuttings from them in the spring of next year. I have lots of stock plants now but, had I done it a few years ago, I would have Thousands of cuttings now. 4. I studied this thing to death at first. It was as if I was

taking a college course. I was afraid of failure. Studying doesn't give you the full benefits of this. You have got to get your fingers in the dirt and get started. 5. I spent too much time on trying to grow things that brought me failure. I should have just given up and bought these particular plants from someone that grew them easily. The profit is in the success and you start with success this way because the cuttings already have roots when you start. 6. I potted some cuttings that I needed to go back and mark later thinking I would definitely remember exactly what they were later. Wrong! Problem: I forgot to go back and mark them. I had to later sell them retail to customers that did not care what color they ended up being. Example... All Rose of Sharon look alike until they bloom and after they bloom you still can't be sure unless you only planted two entirely different colored plants in two different trays and even then you still need to wait until they all set bloom. It's better to toss them and start over.

Nathan C., Clinton, TN-

When I started out I didn't tag everything. I didn't have very many plants so I thought I'd be able to remember what and where everything was with minimal tagging. That sorta worked worked in the short run, but in the long run it created problems. The more plants I added the less I could remember everything I needed to. Tag everything from the get go. You will save yourself some headaches down the line.

Eddie W., Ramseur, NC-

Don't go to DG or Staples and buy cheap address labels. I got busy buying, and potting, and placing on shelf or on the ground with an "identification of sorts" stuck in or under a bunch of pots. When things slowed down. WOW I had a couple hundred pots sitting neatly around needing labels. This is where don't buy cheap labels comes in. I did, and now I'm going to have to replace them all with good WATER PROOF labels, or pot sticks. As others have stated...Doing things twice ain't no fun.

Neil S., North East, PA-

Calling permanent markers permanent is like calling non reality TV shows Reality Shows! Think bigger from the beginning, create a positive cash flow quicker by producing and start moving product quicker! If your in a colder zone, do not buy in product in fall or early winter from warmer zones. You can get away with that by purchasing in spring, but be careful buying in in fall from warm areas to cold zones. Gonna cost you money big-time! Watch the early spring thaws and wet periods after winter, many things do not die from the cold winter weather, they die from the wet spring seasons and thaws. Get em up off the wet ground, to higher ground or put them on pallets or up off the ground with strips of wood. Over winter covering is not as important as getting them out of too wet conditions come spring. That is what probably cost the BIGGEST loses to most startup nurseries. Along with the last section on to wet conditions come spring. Once fall approaches, I have thousands of potted plants and trees that are outside that need very minimum watering once the days start getting shorter and cooler. Many of my outside plant storage areas only get watered minimally once or twice a week. To much water in fall to early winter can be cause for many loses. Root bases start deteriorating by to wet of conditions, come spring you will be wondering why your plants did not come around. Great for making compost, not so great for making money. Most Perennial plants in pots overwinter just fine in a very coarse well draining mix, if your potting up most of your perennials into a mix that is heavy in compost or peat, or too wet and sticky of a mix. Most of your perennials will be goners come spring. There are a few perennials that just do not overwinter well in pots, but I can overwinter thousands, just outside on ground all winter long uncovered here in my zone 5. Too many are overthinking the process of growing, but are trying to take shortcuts by not creating a good drainage potting mix or by using potting soil in bags with too much peat, like Miracle Gro or using just straight compost is only fooling themselves. Plant in a well draining mix, I can grow plants in junk soil and cinders scraped out from along a road. Just as long as it drains well and I add fertilizer. Drainage is the most important mix for container growing.

Patti P., Oakhurst, CA-

My very worst mistake is like Nathan said.....not tagging plants immediately, of course you recognize SOME things if you've had them previously but definitely not all. I thought a good idea would be to make the marker tags IN ADVANCE before the plants even arrive and then they would be ready to just pop in the pots. My other problem is not taking the time to do the Osmocote and Preen when potting – once again, thinking I'll do it later and then I don't know which plants need it or not. For members just starting out, I would say get your Osmocote, Preen (or whatever) and tags ready before you start potting... and thirdly, Visit this Board everyday, even just for a few minutes, just to keep 'learning'.

Richard G., Defiance, OH-

I thought bigger was better so I sat on a lot of things. Bigger IS NOT BETTER and I will never line out stock in grow beds again. I can't possibly dig some of the stuff I planted and at 1 foot spacing, the bottoms are ruined. This year I'm making a lot of LEMONADE. Also, I was too hesitant to try shipping. From now on, I'm going to root them and move them out.

Josh M., North East, PA-

My biggest thing right now is pruning. I bought a bunch of rooted Spirea cuttings this spring and potted them up. They looked great all packed together in the fall but when I pulled them out thinking it was time to sell they were leggy and straggly. Had I pruned them during the summer I could have sold full plants this fall. Potting mix...multiple failures here. Too wet, too dry... Trying to find a good bark source, compost source, etc. You might not like the extra expense up front but if your only dealing with a few hundred plants in the beginning like me I would consider buying bagged nursery mix. The losses were MUCH greater than the extra expense for bagged mix. Waiting until the plant is "perfect" before trying to sell it. It

might be my obsessive compulsive nature, and taking so much pride in what I do (whatever it is) but I have plants sitting around that in my opinion were not ready to sell. And then the UPS guy shows up with my AMLEO order and leaves with 10 plants in the truck because he couldn't believe I was selling those beautiful plants for \$5. Don't be so critical. TALK to local nurseries. I was embarrassed at first because I am so small compared to other growers so I didn't talk to them about what I do. Well that changed this past summer and I have made so many connections with local suppliers and growers that would have been very beneficial 3 years ago after my obsession started when I first found that Mike McGroarty (in the bibs) video teaching you how to propagate in a dish pan and garbage bag. All because I wanted a hedge row of boxwoods and didn't want to pay for them!

Cathy W., Edinboro, PA-

Not realizing how important mouse bait is. Lost WAY too many plants to those creatures my first year. Listening to all the poopheads who said I'd fail at this. My first year, it destroyed my excitement and confidence and it nearly became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Not thinking big enough.

And as others have said... Being too excited when I started and instead of taking more time to learn, I bought all kinds of things without knowing what to do with them once I got them. Including buying without checking zones, and buying from the south in the fall/winter – at least a third of the plants died. Not getting stock plants in the ground.

Barbara D., Murrysville, PA-

When I first started in 2012, I went on a buying spree 😊, thinking if I had a lot of plants to start with I would be better off. I bought plants from southern states, and a lot of them died over the winter! I put everything in pots instead of the ground! My biggest mistake was I did not prune enough, and

plants got to leggy, took some time to get them to look good but I did it! I also bought too much of a variety, instead of concentrating on plants that would be good sellers, and believe it or not, I still have plants that no one wants or even look at! But the good thing is I found out what sells in my area, and what people want. So it took me awhile but I learned the hard way, lost money, and changed my nursery around a few times and I like it the way I have it now!

Dave B., Raleigh, NC-

Wow, I could write a book on the mistakes I've made! Many of the ones listed above, plus... One of the biggest was taking on more than I could reasonably handle. Sadly, I still have over 1000 plants that I bought on the board as RCs in 2014 that are still in 4 inch pots! ** If I had potted them up in 2015, they would have been ready to sell this year. Many will not be ready until 2018, because I probably won't get them all potted up this Winter. ** Many of the faster growing RCs should have been put directly into Mike Style pots, trade gallons or true gallons, rather than 4 inch pots in the first place. Along those lines, one of the things I strive to do is provide plants that aren't readily available at the local big box stores or more popular Nurseries. That, in and of itself is not necessarily a mistake, however, I have at least 12 varieties of Weigela, and close to 10 different types each of Spirea and Abelia. Variety is great, but I think I overdid it a bit. Additionally, I started with over 200 different varieties of plants. Rather than that, I should have chosen 20-50 and focused on getting those ready to sell. If I had, I could have opened in 2015 rather than June of 2016! (I missed the 3 best selling months this year!) Leaving pots directly on the ground, or on a thin layer of mulch, without using pallets or weed fabric. This past spring when I was trying to get ready to open, I had to move lots of things around. Unfortunately, many of the plants on the ground had rooted deeply into the ground through the holes in the pots. Having 3 ruptured disks, I ended up having to hire someone to come and dig or pull the rooted pots out of the ground. Then of course, I had to prune the roots, or pot up the ones that were really bad. **PRIORITIZING INCORRECTLY.** I'm still trying to figure this one out, but for starters, many plants didn't get pruned last Winter or Spring, and they look stupid now... lots of long stems

and not nearly thick enough to sell. (I have dozens of Dappled Willows that each have just 3 or 4 seven foot tall stems... they look nothing like they should.) Waiting on pruning cost me at least one selling season on many types of plants. I know now that it would have been better if I had pruned instead of potting up other plants. (Yep, I'd have even more plants in 4 inch pots, but I'd have lots more plants that are ready to sell.) Oh, there's more, but I'm trying to get dinner ready for my sick Wife... I'll try to post again sometime!

Patsy M., Canon City, CO-

Not knowing about Nolo bait for grasshoppers was the biggy for this year. I will not be skimping on it next year and it will go out as soon as I see the first tiny hopper. We had a grasshopper plague this year that was mind-boggling. They ate plants down to the ground, ate the bark off young trees, and ate the paint off the trim of the greenhouse. I was already in trouble before I asked for help. Tags. The first year I used the "permanent marker" method. Fortunately I did map my plants that year because not very many tags made it through the winter. I use the recycled mini blinds now and metal tags. I did, however, learn something about metal tags (the ones with the little twisty wires to attach them to the plant). Crows and blackbirds are fascinated by those shiny things and will, if given the chance, remove them. I saw them do it. One morning I came out to my rooted cuttings area, and there were tags lined up on the ground that had been removed from the plant by the birds. I didn't know it was the birds at the time, but I watched, and I saw them do it. Now I still use the metal tags, but I push them into the pot. They seem to stay that way. One day, I would love to get the tag software many of you use. Cathy made a great point about not listening to naysayers. Mike and most everyone I have dealt with here are dedicated to see you succeed. This is a great place to learn and get good advice. And like someone else said, mistakes are often opportunities in disguise. If you do get discouraged, talk about here. You will find what you need, whether it is advice, empathy, or sometimes a dose of tough love. You can do this. People love and need plants and you can make more plants 😊

Jeremiah J., Lakebay, WA-

1) Pruning more. Sounds easy enough, but truth be told I could still do better in this area. this year I done a lot better then previous year. 2) Automated irrigation. Amazing how much time hand watering take up. even to manually setup or turn on sprinklers and monitor. 3) General Pest control. still a work in progress. 4) Deer control. its 9:30 pm right now / dark. I had to go check inventory real quick on an item. 2 deer behind my garage scared the crap outta me within 5 feet coming around corner. They love buffets. 5) weed pre-emergent. I know better now, but again still a work in progress doing it timely. 6) Proper pot spacing. Someone else mentioned this too... had a group of plants which looked awesome all bunched together, but when you pull one out its straggly. I caught this mistake early and corrected within same year. And from the above not an issue I've had, but always try to touch your potted plants as often as you can. move them even a couple inches to prevent roots escaping containment even into ground cover. Keep ground cover clean and clear of debris.

Bette B., Woodruff, SC-

Shortly after we or should I say I started this because at that time hubby was working out & I got started into this. We had a role reversal here after I started this he does this full time & now I work out. Ok,"I" got some fantastic looking Crepe Myrtles in from Janice. They looked so good I potted them up & put them in part sun. Some days later I noticed them loosing their leaves. I called Janice & she asked where i had them. (Thank you Janice) After talking to her I moved them to the shade under a tree. I thought I had killed them!! They did eventually come back & flush out. Gradually, I eased them into more sun. Always put shipped in plants in the shade!!! I know we have more blunders but that is the one that comes to mind now. Yes, we are guilty of not pruning enough too!

Gary S., White Plains, MD-

1) leaving stock plants in pot too long. 2) Thinking I need a thousand plants before I have a sale. 3) Not tagging plants. 4) Hesitating to ask questions on the board. 5) Thinking I could create better potting soil than recommended on the board. My best advise to new members- Follow Mike's Plan, Keep it simple, ask questions on the board and learn from newer members. This board will give you the answers your need.