Advisory resources for nurseries include regional agronomists

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Who do you go to for production advice? Your extension agent, university specialist, ag consultant, industry rep . . .? What about your regional agronomist? Do you even know who that person is?

Regional agronomists, like plant pest inspectors, are employees of the N.C. Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services. They are less well known in the horticultural industry, perhaps, because they are often thought of as field crop specialists. In reality, however, they are crop nutrient and agronomic testing specialists — and that makes them very valuable to nurserymen.

North Carolina growers have access to one of the most comprehensive agronomic testing and advisory services in the nation. NCDA&CS Agronomic Division laboratories perform chemical analyses of plant tissue, composted materials, wastes, nutrient solutions and source water in addition to soil tests and nematode assays. If you have a soluble salt problem, suspect a plant-parasitic nematode infestation, are curious about the quality of your irrigation source water, wonder if the analysis of your nutrient solution is what it’s supposed to be, want to submit a pour-through leachate sample or are concerned about poor plant growth or color, then you will probably be sending samples to the Agronomic Division and really should be talking to your regional agronomist on a regular basis.

When Frankie Jones of Willow Oak Nursery in Hookerton first met regional agronomist Dianne Farrer last May, entire sections of his greenhouse plants were dying. He suspected that nice, warm weather sandwiched between cold spells had triggered abnormally quick release of his slow-release fertilizer. Farrer suggested taking pour-through samples to assess soluble salt levels. She also advised Jones to have his source water tested. Then, she demonstrated how to collect both types of samples and complete the accompanying paperwork.

A few days later, Farrer read the solution analysis report and saw that pH, not soluble salts, was a probable factor in the plant growth problem. The irrigation source water had a pH of 3.0. Even though the media had been limed before plants were potted, every watering was steadily pulling the pH back down.

Although pH was a real concern, Farrer suggested additional tests to see if other factors were involved. Plant samples from good and bad areas were submitted for tissue analysis; others were sent to the N.C. State University Plant Disease and Insect Clinic. When neither set of results pointed definitively to other causal factors, Farrer and Jones focused their attention on the pH issue.
Adding lime to the potted plants was out of the question. It just wasn’t practical to add that much. Jones and Farrer arranged to have the nursery media supplier mix in 7 pounds of lime per square yard before delivery. To monitor the situation further, Jones collects pour-through samples from newly potted plants once a month and sends them to the Agronomic Division for solution analysis. He plans to re-test his source water every spring.

Like Jones, all nursery owners can benefit from agronomic advice. The 13 regional agronomists who serve North Carolina growers are knowledgeable on a wide range of plant nutrient- and nematode-related problems. To find the agronomist for your area, visit www.ncagr.com/agronomi/rahome.htm or call the Agronomic Division at 919-733-2655.

Agronomist Dianne Farrer provides advice on fertilization, nutrient management and nematode problems for growers in Craven, Carteret, Greene, Jones, Lenoir and Pitt counties. She can be reached by phone at (252) 830-1718 or by e-mail at dianne.farrer@ncmail.net.