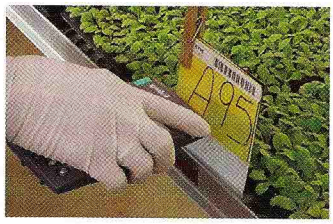

Keeping Track

Automated data-capture technology allows a new level of flexibility, efficiency and tracking previously unavailable to nursery and greenhouse growers.

For any commercial producer of live plant material, keeping track of inventory in the nursery or greenhouse is no small task. In today's competitive environment, the margin of error continues to shrink — so finding problems fast and keeping input costs as low as possible never have been more important. The devil always seems to be in the details.

That's why many of the top plant producers have invested in systems that enable them to track individual containers and in-ground plantings from before the cradle to after the grave. Bar code technology to facilitate automated data collection has made this feasible. To minimize the costs of data collection, Plantware Inc., Batavia, IL, and other solutions developers are exploiting technology to automate data capture throughout the entire production process.

How it Works. Each container is assigned at creation a unique number or "license plate." The container can be a tray, potted specimen or, in the case of in-ground caliper trees, the plant itself (three-fourths of an inch, 1½ inches, 2½ inches and so on). This identity enables the capture of information relating to when, where and how that container was grown, as well as when, where and how the container ultimately was dispensed. By formatting the unique number into a specific bar code symbol, bar code readers can be used to easily record activities and/or changes that take place relating to the container. Information important for people to read, such as the variety name, container (or product form) name, the scheduled sow, stick, line-out and ship week, must also be presented in text form.

Production software applications like Vericell Vision are structured to record the events that occur during the life of a container by capturing the bar code during important processes. For a typical 5-gallon container from creation to final dispensation, a plant started from a potted liner via transplant from a tray is a common example. However, plants originating as unrooted cuttings or whips, bare-root divisions or even seed are handled in the same fashion. If production is by seed, the potting or sticking line screen prompt can be removed, and the sowing line can then be cued.

Demand for the container (tray, pot or other product form) can be recorded in the application in several ways: via customer order, from a production speculation requirement or from a scheduled transplant. On the container's scheduled sow or stick week (and prior to planting), a label must be created using a print prompt, then manually applied to the container or fastened to the tree or plant.

by Robert F. Gabella

PHOTO: ROBERT F. GABELLA