

Evaluating Vegetative Perennial Cutting Suppliers

by Allen R. Pyle

As the demand for perennials continues to grow, there is increasing interest in purchasing perennials as unrooted cuttings (URCs). In developing our vegetative perennial liner program, Raker evaluated numerous perennial URC suppliers. This article discusses some of the key considerations for evaluating vegetative cutting suppliers.

Managing stock plants was not an option when we developed our vegetative perennial liner program. Our facility is set up for propagation, and we would need a separate facility to handle stock properly. Now that there are multiple options for purchasing perennial URCs, the time was right for Raker to expand into vegetative propagation, without having to handle stock or bear the expense of building our own stock management facility. In talking to other perennial liner producers, we learned that some are scaling back their own stock and relying more on purchased cuttings, at least for some items.

Unrooted cutting sources

The major perennial URC suppliers are located outside the US, primarily in Mexico, Central America, and Israel. Most major brokers can source perennial cuttings from at least one supplier.

Arranging to receive sample shipments can be very helpful in assessing the various perennial URC producers. If possible, try to schedule multiple sample shipments over a period of weeks, to get a picture of cutting consistency and quality over time. Do remember that sample shipments may receive extra attention, and may not give a completely accurate picture, however.

Growers can also consider the possibility of purchasing URCs from domestic growers who maintain their own stock plants. Particularly if you are not in a competing market or have a different customer base, this may be a workable option for some growers. There can be additional logistical and communication issues with this type of relationship, if the grower providing the URCs is geared for propagation for internal use, and not experienced in tracking production for shipping off-site.

Varieties

Not all perennial varieties can be propagated by cuttings. And because the number of perennial varieties is so large, even for items that are cutting propagated, you may not be able to find a source for all the varieties you would like to have in your vegetative perennial program. Most cutting suppliers appreciate feedback on recommendations for varieties to add to their lists (particularly when you can indicate the volume that you will be ordering), and will expand their variety list regularly. Typically there is a period of test production, including cleaning up of stock plants, to ensure there are no production problems. It is always a good idea to wait until a producer is experienced with a variety and confident in its production before adding it to your program.

Import restrictions are also a limiting factor for offshore URC producers. Items like Dianthus cannot be imported into the US as cuttings, and some states may have additional inspection and regulatory requirements for imported plant material, including cuttings. It pays to work with your state agricultural inspector when developing a plan for purchasing perennial URCs.

In addition, there are some popular varieties in marketing programs like the Flower Fields, Athens Select, and Blooms of Bressingham that require a grower to be accepted into the program, in addition to paying licensing fees, before gaining access to the varieties.

Cost

It can be quite economical to buy in URCs, particularly when the labor and overhead for managing stock plants is considered. Costs vary among suppliers, with many offering a volume discount for larger orders and some giving discounts for orders placed 15 or more weeks ahead of the ship date.

Remember to include the cost of shipping when evaluating the cost of purchased perennial URCs. Shipping costs generally range from \$70 to \$150 per box, depending on the country of origin and where the shipment is being sent.

Minimums

Minimum orders vary across suppliers, but all have specific minimums per variety and per shipment or per box. Because of these minimums, it can be logistically easier to produce vegetative perennial liners on a speculative basis, though this adds the challenge of forecasting demand and the risk of unsold plant material.

The Raker vegetative perennial liner program is modeled after our year-round, produce-to-order seed plug program. Combined with our target customer base of smaller growers, this means that we are often ordering small numbers of cuttings per variety, with lots of shipments throughout the season. And it can make meeting minimum orders and variety minimums challenging, especially when working with a number of suppliers.

Some suppliers may be more flexible than others regarding minimums per variety and minimums per shipment. It never hurts to ask about whether special arrangements can be made for your orders once you have developed a relationship with a supplier.

Cutting quality and consistency

The quality of purchased perennial URCs is typically good across the various suppliers, but consistency in cutting quality remains an important consideration when evaluating perennial URC suppliers. When URCs vary in size and quality, it is more challenging to produce liners successfully. Unfortunately, there is no shortcut in evaluating a supplier's quality and consistency. The only true measure of consistency comes from experience with a supplier's product over multiple ship dates and production seasons.

You may find that URC specifications differ among suppliers, particularly related to the typical size of cuttings shipped. This generally does not pose production problems, though individual growers may find they prefer one supplier's specifications over another's, and this may vary by variety.

Some suppliers can be flexible with their cutting specifications, and can custom-cut URCs specifically for you, if you have special needs (and can meet applicable minimums.)

Communication

Because cutting quality is generally good across suppliers, communication becomes a critical component to evaluate across suppliers. Communicating with an offshore producer does have its challenges. Suppliers who are easier to work with and more responsive to your needs will have an edge over suppliers with similar quality but more difficult communication.

It is often helpful to work with a broker that has a good history of working with a given supplier and has established contacts and lines of communication. In our experience, this has been especially helpful when doing business with Israeli URC suppliers.

Rapidly acknowledging orders and order changes, and accurately keeping track of pricing and ordered items is important, particularly when you have a diverse perennial liner program and work with multiple suppliers. In addition, prompt responses to

problems and questions is also valuable. Good URC suppliers will be willing to provide technical and cultural suggestions to help you succeed with the cuttings you purchase.

Communication may be more of an issue when dealing with growers who are producing primarily for their own use, as they may not have a well-developed system for tracking information for shipping cuttings off site.

Clean stock

Disease and virus free cuttings are important to successful propagation. Infected material may not root well and may perform poorly after transplant. Because a number of viruses are vectored by insects like aphids and thrips that can be difficult to control, it can be challenging to maintain stock in a clean state, even if it is virus free when established.

Most perennial URC suppliers are taking steps to have clean stock. However, stock quality can vary, and the thresholds of what a supplier considers “clean” are not necessarily the same among suppliers.

It is definitely worthwhile to discuss stock management with your suppliers, to learn what they do to refresh stock and keep it clean. Questions that may be useful to ask include: What type of facility is stock grown in? How often is stock refreshed? Is stock tested for viruses when established? Is there an ongoing virus testing program? What pest management practices are used?

Pests

In addition to being disease-free, URCs should be free of pest insects. Insect larvae and eggs can be transferred on cuttings if they are present in the production facility, leading to pest outbreaks after the cuttings are received.

Scouting cuttings before sticking is recommended, to identify any potential problems early. In our experience, whitefly has been the most common pest present on purchased cuttings.

Availability

A primary challenge for cutting producers is stock plant management and accurately forecasting cutting availability for both future and at-once sales. This can be as much art as science. It is a good idea to keep track of how successful suppliers are in filling your URC orders and how often material is backordered or cancelled by the supplier. Again, this is something that can only be evaluated over time, across multiple shipments.

Suppliers that are new to perennials may have limited availability while they build up their stock base, and new additions to a supplier’s cutting program may also be in limited supply initially.

Consider sourcing the varieties you list from multiple cutting producers, until you become confident enough to choose a preferred supplier or suppliers. Meeting minimums can make this more challenging. Over time, you may find that some URC producers have more success producing specific items than others, so it pays to evaluate multiple sources for the varieties in your program.

Packaging and shipping

It is not enough to consistently produce quality cuttings. The cuttings must also reach your facility in good condition after being shipped. It generally takes 2 to 3 days to receive cuttings shipped from offshore producers.

To survive their time in transit, especially when shipped from a foreign country, cuttings must be packaged properly to ensure that they arrive in good shape. Sturdy boxing that won’t crush or allow cuttings to become jumbled is important. Also, sufficient insulation and cool packs to keep the cuttings fresh during transit is critical.

But boxing is not the only packaging consideration to evaluate. Bags cuttings are placed in need to be well labeled, so the species and variety can be identified easily. In addition, how the cuttings are placed in bags can have a major impact on how efficiently the cuttings can be stuck for rooting. Ideally, cuttings should be arranged neatly, all facing the same direction. This makes it much easier to handle the cuttings, apply rooting hormone, and stick the cuttings. Consistency from bag to bag in both cutting size, number, and arrangement in the bags is also helpful in maintaining efficiency when handling cuttings.

Conclusion

Increasing numbers of perennial URC suppliers gives growers more options for purchasing perennials as cuttings. Growers will need to evaluate URC suppliers based on how well the suppliers can meet the growers' specific needs.