

Nexus Corp.

Retail Reliability

Nexus Corp. has introduced a new line of self-watering benches to save retailers money and provide uniform watering to plants.

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Nexus Corp. has always been in the business of benches. But it wasn't until recently that the Colorado-based company focused on a bench specifically for retailers.

"Over the course of the last dozen years, fixtures in the retail environment have changed to become more aesthetically pleasing," says Evan Sharples, a design and operations engineer at Nexus, which is known for its variety of greenhouse structures. "We saw a need to allow the customer to start to save money on their shrink and extensive amount of labor that is incurred to water those plants.

"So we wanted to come up with a product using technologies in the growing environment – capillary mats and ebb and flood – integrated into a retail-friendly product."

What emerged after six years of research and development is the self-watering bench. In a nutshell, the benches feature a reservoir built inside the table top that has a capillary mat on top of that reservoir. "When we fill the tables, we'll fill the water up to the mat to really flood the mat," Sharples describes, adding the amount of water depends on the type of plants and pots on the table. "Then we let that water drain back to a level that's right at the level of the mat."

The pots continually draw water from the mat, which in turn draws water from the reservoir underneath.

"By doing that we can certainly lengthen the time between watering cycles," he says. "That really depends on the retailer, what

type of product is on the table and how well they maintain and control the fixture."

The Benefits

The self-watering bench system allows the retailer to reduce the loss of plants because of inefficient watering or even over-watering. The system provides uniform water distribution to all the plants on the table, also reducing the amount of labor needed to water and getting sales associates back on the sales floor.

John Allen, a manager at the 20,000 square foot Dallas location of Nicholson-Hardie Nursery & Garden Centers, has been using the benches for nine months in the retailer's indoor blooming potted plants area. With florist-quality blooming material, it was imperative the team watered everything by hand to avoid botrytis. The first test was poinsettia season.

"With the old method with poinsettias – and we'd go through around 20,000 roughly – we had to take them off the bench, submerge them in the bucket (to subirrigate), bring them back out and put them back on the bench."

With all that handling, bracts would invariably get broken and plants would need to be removed. With the self-watering benches, the plants went on the bench and didn't get picked back up until the customer took them to the register. "We saved a tremendous amount of money on that one crop alone," Allen says, adding shrink was drastically reduced from 2008 compared to 2007.

Also, there used to be four people who at one time or another were focused on hand-watering the section all day long.

Now there's one person who runs the department and the rest are free to work with customers.

The Details

Retailers can choose to fill the tables with watering hoses, or they can simplify the whole process even more by supplying water to the table through an overhead water supply line and use a timing device to automate it.

Standard sizes for the benches are 42 inches by 96 inches, which works with the common 10-inch by 20-inch flats. Sharples recommends merchandising annuals and perennials on the benches. The larger the pot, the harder it is for the plants to draw water up, so larger nursery stock won't be as effective on the self-watering benches.

Allen has used the system primarily for indoor blooming potted, but it's also been used at Nicholson-Hardie for flats of begonias, impatiens and other partial shade material under a covered structure. As the budget permits, he says they'll add more benches to the retail mix.

"It's a much better presentation," he notes. "They get even moisture, and it's saving us money. It has things at the proper height for a good presentation." TGC

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