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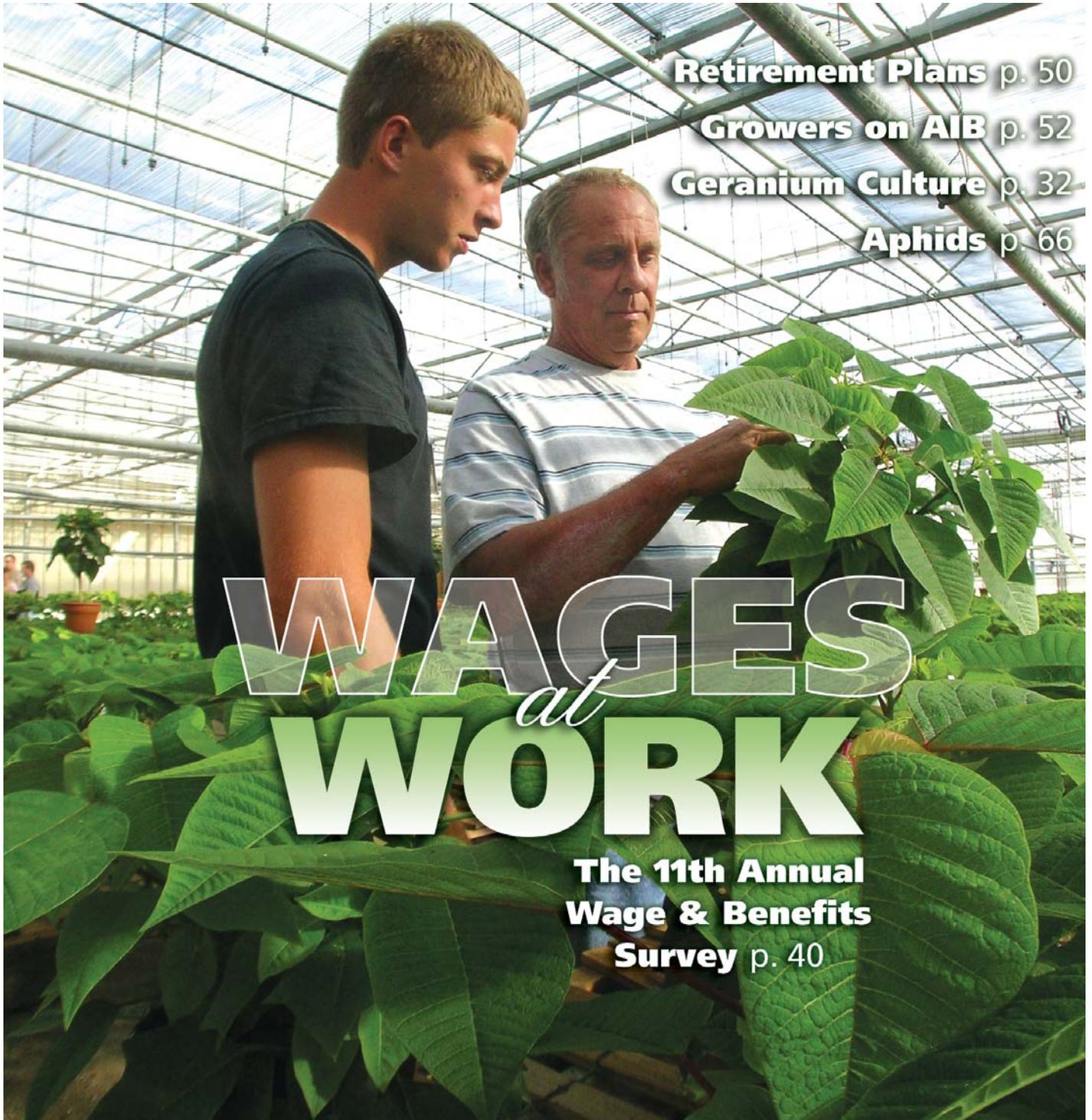
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# Looking for Cheap and Easy Ideas



by JOE MOORE

**Our choices were: buy an entire trailer load or spend a fortune in freight to get a couple of pallets.**

As a general rule of thumb, growers are always looking for something new and improved. Maybe it's a variety that performs better or a new pesticide that has a different mode of action or a slightly different chemistry. Whatever it is, we tend to think there's always something out there that can help us do our job better, easier or cheaper; we just have to find that thing and put it to use in our greenhouses.

In September of 2004 I was in Chicago to attend the International Bedding Plant Conference, sponsored by *GrowerTalks*. I was there for two main purposes: I'd been asked to sit on one of the grower panels for a session, and I was looking for at least one "better, easier or cheaper" idea. During a workshop in a greenhouse on the first day, there was a fellow from the University of Arkansas telling us about the possibility of using par-boiled rice hulls (pbh) as a soil amendment. I looked at the plant samples he had that had been grown using various percentages of pbh, took some of the research literature, thought to myself "that's kind of different, I probably should take a closer look at that" and proceeded to forget about the whole thing after a couple of days. This past year I noticed that a company (Riceland Foods) had started to offer pbh in a commercial form. Their advertisements in some of the industry trade magazines jarred my memory about what I'd seen in Chicago two years earlier, so I stopped by their booth at the OFA Short Course and set up to have some samples sent to me to trial.

About a week after the OFA show, the pbh samples showed up. I looked through the research work and decided that a blend of 70% peat moss and 30% pbh looked like a good place to start. Most of the soilless media that we make in-house is a blend of 70% peat moss and 30% perlite, and the research work for those percentages looked promising. Since it was poinsettia-planting season, we planted some 8.5-in. poinsettias into our new experiment. Two weeks into the trial, things were looking very good. I was pleased with what I was seeing but needed a larger trial. The problem with doing a larger trial was

that the product wasn't available yet from a local distributor in pallet quantities. Our choices were: buy an entire trailer load or spend a fortune in freight to get a couple of pallets. I was feeling pretty good about what I was seeing so far, so we decided to bring in a full load. We settled on planting three different crops into a mix of 70% peat and 30% pbh. We chose fall pansies (all sizes), 9-in. ornamental cabbage and kale, and 6-in. flood-floor poinsettias as crops that'd give us a good, broad-spectrum test.

As of this writing, (October 22), we've been extremely happy with the results from the trials. A few of the things that stand out to me:

1. All of the crops developed root systems that were at least as good as our traditional mix.

2. The 6-in. flood-floor poinsettia crop seems to be taking a little bit more water in at each watering but is still drying out very evenly. This has allowed us to run the floors less often, helping keep the lowest spots in the floors from becoming too saturated.

3. There is hardly any dust from the pbh when making a mix compared to perlite. This is really big, especially for the people in and around the mixing area. Truthfully, all other things being equal, if this was the only benefit from using pbh, I'd still consider it.

4. We experienced a cost savings of roughly \$4 per yard of mix when using pbh versus perlite. This includes the cost of the freight from Arkansas to New Jersey.

Our plans for the immediate future and pbh are to use it in all of our upcoming spring bedding mixes, all of next fall's crops and more than likely our poinsettia crop. It looks like we may have found one of those new products that is "better, easier *and* cheaper." ■

*Joe Moore is head grower for Lucas Greenhouses, Monroeville, New Jersey.*