

Build It With Plastic

When it comes to greenhouse and retail benches, plastic has proven to be an option that is long-lasting, attractive, safe and easy to use.

by PAUL PHILLIPS

BEN, I just wanted to say one word to you, just one word – plastics. There’s a great future in plastics,” Mr. McQuire tells a young Dustin Hoffman playing Benjamin Braddock in the 1967 film “The Graduate.” While the movie was actually making a metaphor between the rising plastics industry and the growing materialism of people, plastics would truly become a revolutionary new component for a multiple number of products. And the horticultural industry has shown to be no exception to the use of plastics. One good example of its impact is in benching.

Decades ago, when the first greenhouse benches were built of wood, growers raved about the whole concept. Indeed, wood was relatively inexpensive and easy to build with. Wooden benches, when new, looked great and so natural. They even smelled nice. At the time, no one seemed to care that their new creations would need maintenance and soon erode. But the thrill of wood soon diminished as many

“do-it-yourself” benchmakers awakened one day to find their benches lacked structural integrity and started sagging. Many wooden benches looked awful and were beginning to splinter.

Growers soon dissolved into factions with rival theories about what to use for benching. If necessity is the mother of invention, then it came as no surprise that plastic soon became a material of choice for bench construction.

Building Durable Displays

Father knows best. At least that’s what Michael Nack of Four Seasons Nursery in Texas decided when he asked his dad whether he should change to plastic benches rather than use wood. In this case, however, his dad was a thermoplastics engineer who understood the advantages plastic bench tops provided over traditional wood and steel platform surfaces.

With input from his father, Nack based his decision on his own experience. He has worked in the retail and wholesale nursery business for 21 years, so he’s a veteran when it comes to organization and displaying nursery

products. His Four Season Nursery moves more than \$500,000 worth of nursery products annually. “Let’s face it,” Nack says.

“Colors and configuration of displays help move our products. We needed a bench that was flexible to create our display area, plus we needed a color scheme that matched the look and feel we wanted

for our nursery.”

After reviewing the options, Nack says he installed L-shaped Dura-Bench displays in each of the primary corners of the nursery and a larger runway display in the middle. “We use wooden legs and frames to support plastic platforms. If certain products are moving faster or slower than others, we reconfigure the two- by four-foot sections into more appropriate displays.”

Nack says he also found that plastic platforms are almost self-cleaning, because the platforms have smooth, non-porous surfaces. “The dirt doesn’t stick very well, so it takes so little effort to clean them,” he adds. He also has found that the plastic tops tend to be safer because they are less likely to heat up from the sun or get jagged edges like steel benches. “Even with our extreme Texas weather, hot for nine months, cold for three, plastic benches won’t crack or chip,” he says. “Unlike wood it won’t splinter and isn’t rough to touch. The color of plastic won’t fade or weaken the benches. It’s also not as heavy as steel, so it’s easy to move around, but still strong enough and tough enough to bear up under the weight of very heavy pots and the constant scraping from sliding pots and racks across them.”

As for cost, Nack says he believes plastic benches cost about the same as wood or steel, but offer more advantages and no disadvantages in comparison.

Do It Right Or Do It Over

For most business owners, doing things half way is no way to do business. That’s certainly true for the owners of Wilson’s Nursery and Christina’s Flowers, the respective wholesale and retail ends of a \$3.2 million nursery operation in Dallas. Kelsey London, the manager for both businesses, says that display perspective is what drove the



Dura-Bench plastic platforms work nicely for growing facilities.



Plastic platforms are safer for growers and consumers.

The Deciding Factor

There are a lot of reasons that plastic is the common choice for a lot of product, as plastic truly has revolutionized the greenhouse bench. It is attractive, lightweight and safe for customers and employees, UV-protected, easy to assemble and disassemble, flexible, low-maintenance, strong and long-lasting. In addition, plastic prod-

ucts also have been found to be cheaper than wood and steel.

So while the 1967 movie "The Graduate" may have been pointing out the inherent materialism of people, the filmmakers did make a good point that plastics would be the future. As least that has been the case with benches. GG

About the author: Paul Phillips is vice president of marketing for Southwest Agri-Plastics, Inc., 800-288-9748, www.swapinc.com.

decision to install plastic benching at the retail location in Dallas, as well as the growing farm in Pottsboro, Texas.

"We chose to go with plastic benching because we wanted smoother, more professional looking benches for displaying plants to our customers," he says. "The plastic panels we purchased don't splinter or have rough edges or broken sections that traditional wood, wire or mesh tops do, which could potentially injure employees or customers."

With more than 15,000 flats on display at the farm, mostly English ivy and Asian jasmine in 4-inch pots, London says the plastic bench tops are very easy to use. "We configured all of our benches using plastic bench tops and essentially the same bases we had used previously," he says. "The plastic sections were lightweight and easy to put together. It didn't require much in the way of extra attention or resources and it cost the same as wood."

For both the retail and wholesale operations, London says the Dura-Bench tops are used to display flowers and 1-gallon plants, mostly lining fences with the tables and creating natural aisles that make it easier for customers to browse. He also says he appreciated the fact that the panels don't fade so the display areas look consistently good. "We know that the panels have already paid for themselves after one year," London says. "We typically replace rotted wood flats every year, plus the bases with Dura-Bench. We expect the plastic panels to last a long, long time, plus they add some degree of structural strength to the frame structure itself."

Indeed growers across the country are finding benches made of polypropylene material are impact- and wear-resistant. Plastic has the ability to resist damage from the sun. And plastic benches are available with predrilled construction holes that offer the added advantage of quick assembly and disassembly without damaging the bench tops.