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# Sizing Up *Standardization*

*An Illinois nursery owner says standardizing the size of plant containers would be advantageous to green industry businesses, as well as environmentally responsible.*

*Text and photos by PLATT HILL*

**W**e call ourselves the “green industry”; however, not all of our industry practices pass the test of being truly environmentally friendly or “green.” Of particular concern is that — as a group of growers, landscapers and retailers — we are responsible for sending an estimated 350 million pounds of discarded plastic containers to landfills every year, according to the EPA. As an ongoing practice, this is not sustainable or defensible. Our planet’s oil reserves and landfill space are limited; we are running out of both. In the very near future, our industry will not be able to continue the practice of growing and marketing our products in single-use plastic containers. The change will be driven by either economic forces — as oil prices increase again — or by the more worrisome specter of government regulation.

Are we bad people for running our businesses the way we do? Not really. Fifty years ago, we sold container-grown plants in recycled, steel pineapple cans and egg cans (the original 1-gallon and 5-gallon cans). Our annual bedding plants were sold in wooden flats or scooped out of the flats and wrapped in newspaper. We then entered a period of modern plastics and inexpensive oil to manufacture growing containers.

As labor costs increased, our industry pursued the most economical direction — growing our plants in single-use plastic containers. There were many pioneers and innovators who worked to develop the best container size and configuration. What would work best? Should the pot be wider than it is tall, such as a mum pan or an azalea pot? Should the pot be 10 percent smaller than last year’s size so the grower can save on production costs and not have to raise his prices this year? Which is better: a square pot, round pot or hexagonal pot?

All of this work was being completed by bright, capable and well-intentioned people. Their research has provided great value to our industry; however, the innovation was being done against a backdrop of an agricultural industry dominated by thousands of independent growers, all trying to build a “better mousetrap.” Thus, we have arrived at our situation today where our local nursery pot distributor offers for sale 17 different-sized No. 1 pots (some differing in displacement by less than 2 percent). It strains the imagination to try to come up with reasons why we need 17 different-sized No. 1 pots to be able to grow quality plants and bring them to market in an orderly and appealing manner.

It is time for our industry leaders to step back from the day-to-day operations of their businesses, look 10 to 20 years into the future and decide the best way to grow and bring our products to market. Then, we need to chart a course to take our industry from where we are today to where we should be. If we think that 17 different-sized No. 1 pots are where we want to be, then we should do nothing (sort of like what the Titanic crew did when they heard reports of icebergs ahead).

**Standardized approach.** A small, but growing, group of us in the industry think that it is time to take the lead and follow the path of other industries that have adopted standardization.

It is noteworthy that other industries did this many years ago, and both their businesses and their customers have benefited. Pepsico Inc., The Coca-Cola Co., Schweppes International Ltd., Canada Dry, even Anheuser-Busch Inc. all put their product in a standard, 12-ounce beverage container. It is the same not only in the US, but the world over.

The advantages of standardization are clear: The container manufacturers can tool their cans with confidence, the transportation people can design efficient systems, the merchants can design shelving and displays to fit the containers, the vending machine manufacturers can design machines that will dispense the 12-ounce can, and from the marketing side, the consumer understands and relates to a 12-ounce beverage can.

Another example of standard sizing is our electrical industry. You don't have to worry if your new television will plug into the wall outlet. You know that the plug was designed for a standard-sized wall outlet, and the components were designed to operate on 110-volt, 60-cycle, alternating current electrical power.

Our plumbing is standardized; all pipes and fittings will interconnect regardless of the manufacturer. Duracell, Energizer, Rayovac and others manufacture D-cell, A-cell, AA-cell and AAA-cell batteries. We know they will fit our flashlights, cameras and other electronics.

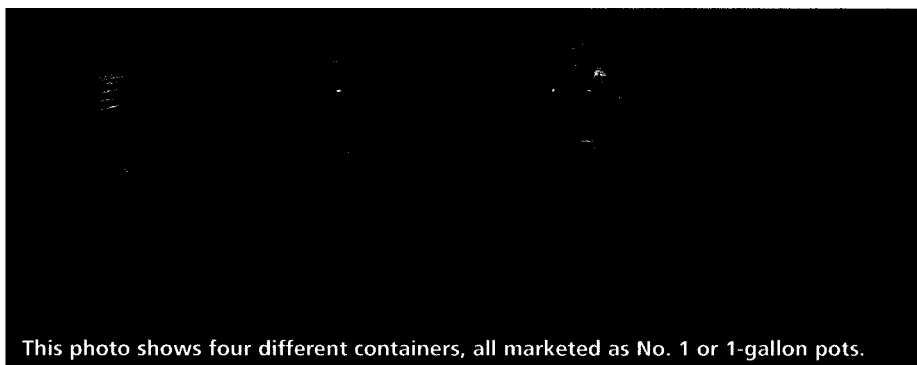
**Economic advantages.** The following are four economic advantages for the nursery and floriculture industries that support adopting standard-sized containers:

- We would be able to design our benches, growing beds, shipping racks, display beds and pot-in-pot (PIP) growing systems with the knowledge and comfort that the growing containers will fit them. We will not find that the "new

pot" fits three and a half pots across, effectively limiting us to putting only three pots across on our shipping rack or our production bench, which results in wasted shipping and production space. We could design our PIP production systems with confidence that there would be multiple suppliers of the "growing pot" that would fit our "socket" pots. We would not be exposed to the risk that a single manufacturer of a particular-sized growing pot would drop that size from its product line, and we would be forced to dig up and change all of our socket pots.

- We know our shipping trucks are going to be 8 feet wide. We can design the standardized growing containers so they will fit efficiently in our shipping

Mart in Ohio. The consumer who buys those nine roses could return the used, empty containers to their local garden center/grower who would give the consumer a credit for, say, half the wholesale cost of a new, empty No. 3 pot. The customer feels good because they're environmentally friendly, and they also get a little reward for being so. The garden center/grower saves half their cost on a new No. 3 pot that they can use to grow their roses next year, and they get the customer in their store. It is possible that box stores, independents and landscapers could set up collection bins at their stores, and large growers or redistributors could collect the pots, clean and sanitize them, and reuse or resell them.



This photo shows four different containers, all marketed as No. 1 or 1-gallon pots.

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racks in an 8-foot truck. The shipping rack manufacturers would have the advantage and confidence that they were designing to certain standards and could manufacture the shipping racks to efficiently meet those standards. The transportation-expense component of our products will continue to grow as oil prices rise. It only makes good sense to maximize our efficiency in this area.

- With the increasing cost of labor and the uncertainty in availability, our industry should prepare to mechanize. It will be far easier for the engineers, machine designers and manufacturers to produce equipment that will effectively handle a standard American Nursery & Landscape Association (ANLA) No. 1 pot than it would be for them to produce a machine that will handle 17 different-sized No. 1 pots.
- Adopting standards would allow us to use containers multiple times with concomitant savings. For example: A rose grower in Oregon ships nine roses in a standard ANLA No. 3 pot to a Wal-

**Marketing advantages.** The following are two marketing advantages for adopting standard-sized containers:

- With standards, the market for finished "drop-ins" would explode. For example: Mrs. Jones has two matching \$800 urns on either side of her front door. They were manufactured to accept the standard ANLA No. 5 pot. Mrs. Jones buys her spring-color No. 5 pots from Lowe's (pansies, Johnny-jump-ups and madworts) and drops them in her urns for a perfect match. On Memorial Day, she brings her Lowe's pots to Platt Hill Nursery Inc., Carpentersville, IL, which accepts her used No. 5 pots, credits her \$1 per pot, and she selects her summer-color No. 5 pots from the hundreds that the nursery's design team has planted for her perusal. In the fall, she returns these pots to Countryside Flower Shop, Nursery & Garden Center, Crystal Lake, IL, gets a credit and selects ANLA No. 5 pots with mums and kale to drop in her urns. She never gets her hands dirty, and she loves it!

- As an industry, we have been forced by our consumer-protection laws to present our products as 3.2-quart/374.366-milliliter pots. The consumer does not relate to these sizes. They continue to ask for 1-gallon perennials, 10-inch hanging baskets and 4-inch geraniums. Standardizing would open the door for us to settle on sizes that are meaningful and appropriate for our customers. Very quickly, the consumer would relate to the new ANLA-standard Nos. 1, 2 and 5 pots.

**Environmental advantages.** The following are two environmental advantages for adopting standardization:

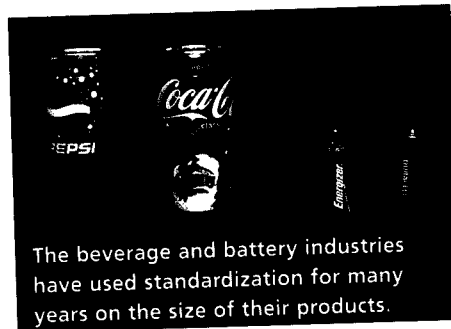
- If we standardize, it makes it possible for us to reuse plastic pots. If we only reuse our containers one time, we will cut our cumulative waste stream in half. Hooray!
- The same can be said for our consumption of petrochemical-based plastic. Double hooray!

**Arguments against standardization.**

The following three arguments (with counterpoints) could be made against adopting standardized containers:

- "Standardized containers will result in container manufacturers selling fewer containers." True, but the fact that we are leaving an era of inexpensive oil and plentiful landfills will lead to the conclusion that we cannot continue sending 350 million pounds of plastic containers to landfills every year. Inevitably, the container manufacturers will sell fewer pots even if we continue our current practices.
- "Standardizing containers will limit innovation." Having standards would not prevent growers from producing non-standard-sized containers. Coca-Cola could sell a 13-ounce can, if it chose to. We could still plant in creative containers, such as an old boot.
- "Standardizing containers will hamstring efforts at product differentiation and the marketing advantages that go with it. Our product would become a commodity." It is true that we would limit our ability to use container size for product differentiation. The customer is really most interested in the plant, its size, quality, features, benefits, novelty and garden performance; we still have plenty of avenues for differentiation. We can still develop superior tags and point-of-purchase materials to augment marketing.

It should be noted that container standardization is not a replacement for our industry's efforts to seek alternative mate-



The beverage and battery industries have used standardization for many years on the size of their products.

rials to plastic growing containers and carriers. Standardization should be pursued in parallel with Elle, chicken feather, rice hull and other biodegradable pots. It would be a mistake to give up on the future of plastic pots until we have effectively solved the problem of getting the organic-type pot to biodegrade at the right time and the right speed. That has been the challenge with peat pots and paper byproduct-type pots. The benefits of standardization apply to biodegradable pots, as well.

We should also continue to pursue the recycling of our plastic products. Plastic containers may still be the best alternative for some time to come, and even if we collect and reuse them, they will not last forever. We should continue to develop a responsible way of recycling. Note, however, that reuse is a far superior environmental approach than recycling.

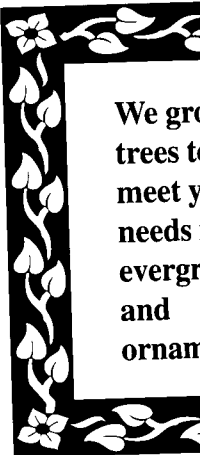
**Where do we go from here?** Standardization is a national initiative with ramifications for growers, landscapers, retailers and container manufacturers. It would be best addressed by a national organization representing all segments of the industry. I believe the ANLA is best positioned to take the lead on this issue. Support would also be needed from the Professional Landcare Network, OFA — an Association of Floriculture Professionals, Garden Centers of America and other industry organizations.

If you support this concept and are tired of throwing containers away rather than reusing them, please contact your ANLA senator ([www.anla.org](http://www.anla.org)), or if you're not an ANLA member, fax a brief message of support or opposition (if you think this is a bad idea) to the ANLA at (202) 789-1893. I would also love to hear your thoughts — pro or con.

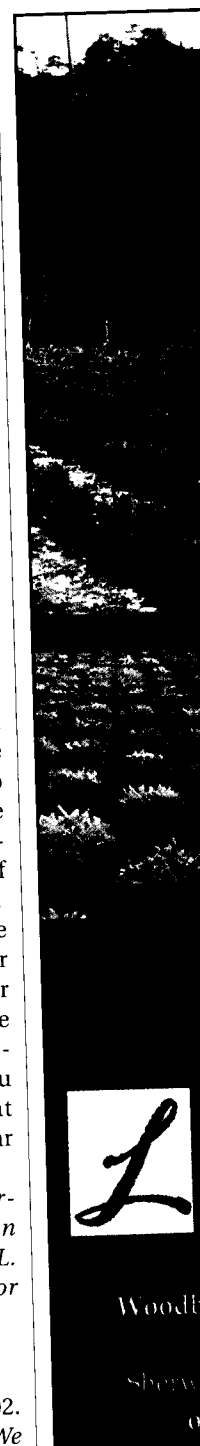
Platt Hill is owner of Platt Hill Nursery Inc., which has locations in Bloomingdale and Carpentersville, IL. He can be reached at (630) 529-9394 or [plathillnursery@sbcglobal.net](mailto:plathillnursery@sbcglobal.net).

**References.**

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