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# Successful Scouting

*David Kuack*



Controlled environment growers are aware of the benefits of scouting their crops for pests and diseases. Initially, many growers will try to do the scouting themselves or have someone on their staff handle the scouting activities, including hanging yellow sticky cards, taking pest counts and inspecting plants for disease symptoms.

Elise Lobdell, who's been scouting for 35 years, said controlled environment growing operations should have a dedicated scout, but other employees should be empowered and educated to recognize potential problems with a crop.

Photo courtesy of Cornell IPM Program.

"At some point growers may realize they aren't on top of the scouting and they need to have someone else do it," said Elise Lobdell, an independent professional scout in New York. "Or they may have tried to have someone on their staff do the scouting who may be knowledgeable at identifying pests and diseases. However, that person may be pulled to do other tasks when things get busy.

"The spring typically is the busiest time of year for the growers I scout for so that's when a scouting program typically stalls out. If scouting isn't done consistently—preferably once a week on the same day at the same time in the same location, so comparisons can be made—the program won't be effective."

Elise said as finished crops are being shipped out scouting can become less of a priority. However, when new crops are coming in they can become exposed to whatever pests and diseases weren't dealt with on the previous crops, making it even more vital that the scouting program continues.

## Empowering employees



Elise said controlled environment growing operations should have a dedicated scout, but other employees have to be empowered and educated to recognize issues.

“Greenhouse workers need to know that they can bring any issues they see to the scout’s or grower’s attention,” she added.

Nick Petterelli, greenhouse manager at Ponto’s Greenhouses, is using what he learned at the Greenhouse Scout School in his daily work activities. He’s looking to start an IPM program that will include the use of biological controls.

Photo courtesy of Nick Petterelli.

In the greenhouses where Elise scouts she explains to the growers they need to tell the employees that they want them to point out problems. She encourages greenhouse workers to show her potential problems.

“The greenhouse workers know the plants and what they are supposed to look like,” she said. “They are very good workers, but in some cases, they don’t want to cause problems. The workers need to be empowered to say that there may be something wrong with the plants.”

All workers should know what to look for, too. “These workers should also be given some training. Anyone who is spending time in the greenhouse should be trained so they can identify pests and disease symptoms,” she said.

Elise noted the keys to a good program are consistency in the greenhouse and education on what pests and diseases to look for and how to identify them.

“If the scout knows what they’re doing and they are in the greenhouse every week, there is really no reason for a scouting program to fail,” she said. “In a well-run scouting program, things don’t get out of hand.”

## Scouting training program



In 2023, with funding from a Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Research & Education (SARE) grant, Cornell University, in cooperation with the University of Vermont and the University of Maine, launched a seven-session certificate program and webinar series on scouting for disease, insect and weed pests of greenhouse ornamentals. Although the Online Greenhouse Scout School focuses on greenhouse floriculture crops, the scouting principles discussed and practices apply to other controlled environment crops.

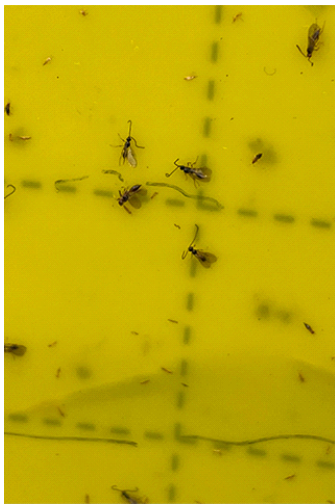
Scouting has to be done consistently—preferably once a week on the same day at the same time in the same location—so pest count comparisons can be made.

Photo courtesy of Elise Lobdell.

In addition to the scouting webinar series, which is available online any time, Cornell also offers a six-week

scouting certificate program in the spring. The certificate program enables participants to earn a certificate demonstrating their knowledge and skills as a greenhouse scout. The program includes all presentations, scouting equipment, electronic resources and discussions with presenters and other program participants. Each 90-minute class covers both scouting methods and identification. People can also sign up for 60-minute webinars, without the resources, discussion and equipment.

“The program provides information so that people can better identify greenhouse pests, diseases and weeds, but also covers scouting techniques, resources and how to communicate with greenhouse owners,” said Betsy Lamb, coordinator of Ornamental IPM in the Cornell Integrated Pest Management Program. “We also cover biological controls because the people who are teaching the classes have expertise in the use of biologicals. When we are talking about a particular pest, we provide the participants with an overview of the pest and also the biological controls that can be used against it, as they might find them on sticky cards, for example.”



The program provides students with background information, but also gives them hands-on practice. For the certificate, there's hands-on homework, too.

“We make sure that they practice scouting in their own greenhouse or we help them find a greenhouse to practice what they learn in the classes,” Betsy added.

Working around the plants daily, employees should be able to identify the difference between biological controls (wasps shown) and thrips.

Photo courtesy of Elise Lobdell.

One of the factors considered when the scouting training program was being developed was the potential to encourage students or current greenhouse employees to consider scouting as a career.

“This program also provides people already working in greenhouses additional training in scouting,” she said. “Providing participants with this certificate gives them proof that they have gone through a scouting training program and may help to elevate their positions in their greenhouse jobs.”

Since its inception, 66 greenhouse owners, workers and students have participated in the certificate program and 135 have attended at least one webinar.

## Applying scouting and IPM principles

Nick Petterelli, greenhouse manager at Ponto's Greenhouses in Baldwinsville, New York, participated in the first scout certificate program in March 2023. At the time Nick was working at another greenhouse operation where Elise was working as a contracted scout.

“Elise, who helped develop the scouting certificate program, told me about it so I signed up,” Nick said. “The program provided me with the opportunity to meet other industry professionals. The instructors who taught the classes were very friendly and knowledgeable. The in-depth information that was provided, the homework assignments and the class projects all helped me because I was working in a commercial greenhouse at the time.

“I was able to apply what I was learning when I was at work. It was even more hands-on experience for me.

The program provided me with a real world education in different growing operations and what other professionals who are doing this for a living are dealing with on a daily basis.”

## **Back to School**

The Online Greenhouse Scout School is scheduled to be taught again beginning in February 2026. For more information, contact Betsy Lamb at [eml38@cornell.edu](mailto:eml38@cornell.edu) or [click here go to the website](#).

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