

ENERGY SAVING IN PROTECTED HORTICULTURE

There has always been a need to reduce energy usage in protected cropping systems, but recent steep increases in the costs of all sources of fuel have highlighted the need to focus on energy savings.

The first steps to energy saving are very simple. Look at the obvious areas such as shutting doors as quickly as possible and making sure maintenance of broken glass, ripped polythene and sticking ventilators is carried out swiftly.

Ensure that heaters and boilers are serviced according to their manufacturer's guidelines to ensure they operate efficiently. These steps are just day to day good practice that everybody should be taking.

At a more strategic level, you could review your growing regimes: is there any scope for dropping the temperature even a couple of degrees? Substantial energy savings can be made by comparatively slight reductions in temperature.

You should also conduct a thorough and honest review of your facilities. It may be that they are no longer suitable for high input crops. In an increasingly competitive market it is essential that your production strategies make the best use of the facilities you have. Reviewing facilities and systems allows you to look at the potential costs and benefits of upgrading equipment or to examine the potential of changing to lower input cropping.

A close look at the cropping programme will also yield potential savings. For example a pot plant crop such as Poinsettia has a high-energy use. You could consider obtaining the plants earlier and growing them on when there is plenty of natural light and heat. It is a lot cheaper to grow a plant in August than to force it in December, plus the end result is likely to be better.

Similarly a spring bedding crop could be delayed so if you usually start in week 8 try to work out a programme starting at week 10 or 12. The early crop is always hard to grow because of poor light. It may also be ready before the main demand. It looks as if there is going to be a period of low prices in Welsh horticulture, due to competition. Therefore it is important to try and cheapen production.

Underpinning any management decision there will always be financial data. So it is important to know what the influence of any increases on the profitability of the crop will be, and also to keep a tight grip on costs.

It is extremely useful to keep a year on year record of both energy use and costs so upward trends can be spotted and analysed. This kind of information also enables you to predict the impact of energy price increases on your profitability using your previous energy usage data. Your own figures will always be more accurate than published data and can be an invaluable tool to you.

Energy saving is important to everyone and it's never too late to start making reductions in your energy usage.



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