

GROWERTALKS

Features

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Giving Love to the New and Old

Jennifer Zurko

Every year, when the Ball Publishing editors choose the finalists for the Young Grower and Young Retailer Awards, we're amazed that the cache of nominees seem to be getting younger and younger. Or maybe we're just getting older ...

Both are true, of course. As the once-new industry pros climb up the ladder and become veterans, there are new up-and-comers ready to begin their careers at the bottom rung. A lot of people are excited about these new professionals and possibilities of fresh ideas they'll bring with them, while the elders wave their hands and say, "Hey, don't forget about us!" (As a Gen Xer, I'm used to this.)

The same could be said when it comes to introducing new varieties. As of press time, we've just come back from the California Spring Trials where we saw tons of new and improved varieties—and all of that is great. New is good. But what about the "older" stuff that consumers are just starting to know and love? What about the stuff we now consider commodities (mums, poinsettias, etc.), but that homeowners still expect to see in their garden centers?

We posed this conundrum to our three talented Young Grower finalists and they said there are ways to give everything some love.

Even though he's only in his mid-20s, **Evan Barrington** is like a seasoned grower—skeptical of varieties that are touted as "new and improved." He feels we should spend more effort communicating the benefits of the old tried-and-true items that are just garnering name recognition among consumers, while also trying out the new stuff to see if they really perform as promoted by the breeders.

Like a dog spotting a squirrel, human beings get distracted by new things. **Rajvir Prasher** said it's normal to be excited about new, especially because people usually think "new" means "better" and it fits with the latest trend. But he says you can't push aside the tried-and-true items because consumers (and growers) have learned to appreciate not just their beauty, but dependability, too.

Abby Bruce works on the perennial production side of Costa Farms, one of the largest growers in the country. And many perennial varieties are part of the old reliable list of plants that homeowners have been growing in their yards for years. Abby says she appreciates the sentimentality that goes with it, but also knows that today's consumer is not the same as 15 years ago. The ability to use modern technology (i.e., social media) allows growers and retailers to get people just as excited about the older varieties as they are about the new ones.

Our panel of judges will choose the 2018 *GrowerTalks*/Dümmen Orange Young Grower Award winner based on their nomination applications, their essays and a telephone interview. We'd like to thank our esteemed

judges for their time and support of this award. This year's judges are:

Anna Ball

President & CEO
Ball Horticultural Company
West Chicago, Illinois

Art Parkerson

Owner of Lancaster Farms
Suffolk, Virginia

Susie Raker-Zimmerman

Vice President
Raker-Roberta's Young Plants
Litchfield, Michigan

Jill Mullaney

2017 Young Grower Award Winner
Halleck Horticulture
Dallas, Texas

Essay Question: *For growers, it's easy to get retail and landscape customers excited about new varieties. But what can growers do to get customers excited about existing varieties—the bread-and-butter items that have almost become commodities?*



Evan Barrington

Age: 26

Title: Head Grower/Pest Control & Irrigation Manager

Operation: May Nursery, Inc.

Havana, Florida

The goal of every nursery is to produce the highest quality plant to sell. A plant that struggles to grow is useless to the homeowner, landscaper, retailer, and ultimately, the nursery grower.

In my experience as a grower, the majority of these newer varieties of patented plants are production nightmares. Pest and disease susceptibility coupled with overall poor root systems are the main problems that lead to producing a plant that's

not of acceptable quality to the retail and landscape markets.

New variety introductions come and go, but what about the varieties that have been around for hundreds of years? What about the core items that are the foundation of the nursery industry in the U.S.? The bread-and-butter items are what they are because of their durability and survivability through a litany of circumstances, both economically and in production. Bread-and-butter items—such as Indian Hawthorne, Ilex schilling, Compacta Holly, low-growing junipers, G. G. Gerbing and George Tabor Azaleas, Abelia grandiflora and Hydrangea macrophylla Penny Mac are easier to grow, cheaper to produce and are the backbone of the industry—especially on the nursery side.

As nursery growers, our job is to simulate an ideal growing environment for plants by providing them with the proper

amount of fertilizer, water and soil while protecting them from pests and diseases. When plants leave the nursery, they're no longer in an optimum environment. Instead, they're being planted in a landscape under the care of homeowners who are frequently not nursery professionals. The general lack of knowledge about plant care can be very problematic when it comes to maintaining finicky plants.

My go-to example is the dwarf plant that blooms abundantly. A dwarf plant, by nature, has a weaker root system than a non-dwarf. A smaller plant with less leaf surface area produces less energy, thus growing slower and using less water than surrounding plants in the landscape. This oftentimes leads homeowners to overwater, ultimately killing them.

The homeowner, unknowingly giving improper care, still expects them to perform as advertised! "They looked so good at the nursery!" says the landscaper when they're in our office asking why the plant only survived one year in the landscape. That's because our livelihoods depend on it. We can give that plant everything that it needs to perform as advertised, however, the majority of homeowners won't be able or are willing to.

Now compare new releases to varieties that have literally been in the industry and landscape for decades. They have and will continue to grow in a wide assortment of conditions. They tolerate a greater range of pH and are adaptable to multiple soil types and watering schedules. In most cases, they're also more resistant to pest and diseases. Simply put: they're easier to grow.

Let's talk dollars. The goal of every business owner is to turn a profit. Increase profits by decreasing production costs. The cheaper you get that plant to market, the higher the profit—regardless if you're a nursery grower, landscaper or retail garden center.

I'm no economist, but I do know that \$12.50 is more than \$6.75. I also know that when I sit down and factor in production costs of each of those plants, my margins on Patented Plant A (\$12.50) are much thinner than Non-Patented Equivalent B (\$6.75). Plant A doesn't overwinter in the southeastern U.S. very well, especially during a rainy winter. Going into winter dormancy, Plant A has to be bunched and covered during rainy spells to prevent root decline and eventual crop loss. When spring arrives, we have to re-space them, thus increasing production costs for that plant.

Four beds over is Plant B and it survives the same winter just fine with no additional input. When you include royalties and liner costs associated with patented varieties with high production costs, our ability to stay competitive in the market diminishes. Our goal is to operate at a profit, so we must increase the price per plant to cover the high production costs. This increase in price has a trickle-down effect all the way to the end user: the homeowner. All this for a plant that was released as an "improved" version of a variety that's been around for generations. Homeowners are paying double for plants that are harder to care for than the existing originals.

This is where marketing comes in. Plant breeders and companies have spent millions of dollars marketing "new and improved" versions of these varieties and the customers are biting. Looking around May Nursery, I see tens of thousands of colored pots representing patented plants, so they must be doing something right.

As for marketing the staple items, this is where we in the horticulture industry come in. Landscapers can get creative with design ideas to incorporate existing varieties in distinct ways. Growers can pass along information to landscapers and retail garden centers about varieties that are already out there. We can encourage homeowners to use more native plants that are already growing in their area.

A branded new release doesn't always mean it's the best option. Knowing what varieties fit in each application, both old and new, and using them homogeneously in the landscape will lead to more satisfied customers. Retailers can push the bread-and-butter plants by promoting an easier growing, cheaper alternative to a plant with a fancy pot.

This industry wouldn't be where it is today if it wasn't for plant introductions. Knock Out/Drift Roses, some Encore Azaleas, as well as Endless Summer and Limelight Hydrangeas, to name a few, have been industry-changing introductions. What do they have in common? They're easy to grow, disease resistant and thrive in the landscape with minimal care.

Good plants are worth the expense to the grower and end consumer. This industry was built on a handful of plants that are still relevant in today's applications. Instead of getting caught up in the "New and Improved," let's find new ways to incorporate more of the staple plants that got us here.



Abby Bruce

Age: 23

Title: Grower

Operation: Costa Farms

Trenton, South Carolina

Our generation of plant productions are a constant balance of the tried-and-true vs. the new-and-interesting. As growers, we need to have a scientific plant perspective, as well as an artistic perspective of what the end consumer desires.

Keeping traditional varieties in the mix can be a challenge for nurseries. A portion of our customer base stands by the varieties they've always known, but other consumers are always looking for the next new thing and are willing to pay a premium for it.

New consumers to the category don't think the same way previous generations did 15 years ago. As consumers' minds change, we need to change the way we present our plant varieties. This offers the exciting opportunity to evolve our marketing techniques and think outside of the box of how we plan, grow and display our products!

Keeping up with trends and technology today is crucial in relaying information to the consumer about the varieties that have stood the test of time. The Internet allows us to incorporate creativity into each variety that we sell. Through social media, mobile apps and online advertising, we can provide every plant with an equally educational and inspirational marketing opportunity.

Knowledgeable, passionate employees are key to success in growing and marketing varieties here at Costa Farms; displaying the classic plants is as important as presenting the new varieties that help our industry grow. We participate in weekly grower rides that help us learn about the new vs. the traditional, the end consumer's viewpoint and trends of what the new generation of home gardeners are looking for.

Not only do we get to work around beauty daily, but we get to create beauty! It's important to relate that passion of the modern and the classic to the retail customers that depend on us. Our group of growers are lucky to work for a trusted producer in the industry that has an extensive customer reach and attracts both novice and experienced gardeners alike.

While key selling points in the field consistently change, horticulture is an industry deeply rooted in tradition. There will always be plant varieties consumers buy because their parents or grandparents had them in their yard growing up. For a lot of gardeners, a plant represents a memory or a story. It's important that we market the classic varieties by showcasing their unique purposes, benefits and history.

Younger generations of consumers care about where their purchases come from, whether it be food, clothing or plants. Sales are no longer just impulse or traditional. People are, more than ever, looking for a deeper justification

behind their purchases. With this mindset, we're presented with new marketing opportunities for our trusted varieties.

How certain plants can be used, where they come from and how they can continue to benefit us is important information we need to convey. It's not only about the actual plant, but we also must create an emotional connection with our consumer! Nice foliage, bright flowers and an easy-to-grow nature are qualities we're all striving for, but we also must take into account the aspects that cannot be seen during a shopper's decision.

The industry is lucky to be able to display information about our products through social media and technology. Online communication can effectively help in promoting new and established varieties. To stay competitive, it's becoming more important to stay aware of how we can brand our products to appeal to every age group. Ultimately, the more information and purposes a consumer has for a plant, the more reason they have to purchase it. Our GardenVision team visits stores regularly to research point-of-purchase placement, merchandising opportunities and how we can display varieties to show their uniqueness. Every in-store display or article for a traditional variety is an opportunity to inspire a new gardener!

It's our job as growers to constantly research new uses for timeless varieties. This is the fun part for us as cultivators. We have this unique chance to find new opportunities for everything we grow. Some of the best innovation I see every day isn't solving a problem with something new, but looking at our existing resources in a new light. It excites our team to exercise our creativity in switching up pot sizes, combinations, marketing processes and growing practices.

Consumers aren't the same as they were 15 years ago, but luckily neither is how we grow plants! We're always looking for more original and innovative processes to help the consumer enjoy a beautiful plant that may be easier to grow thanks to something we've learned to do.

I believe we can anticipate consumers will always be interested in the next new thing, however, it's comforting to know the horticultural industry looks to where we've come from to advance where we're going. This is one of the things that drew me to this field in the beginning.

Growing mainly perennials, I have a true appreciation for the old favorites that surround us here in the South. By putting a new twist on the tried-and-true varieties, we can compare growing practices, purposes and experiences with decades of gardeners. Working together to promote classic varieties is yet another example of plants bringing people together. We can show gardeners of today new, innovative ideas about varieties previous generations have loved.

For me, growing plants is the perfect combination of science and art. We have to market both of those angles for the trendy varieties—and especially the classic ones. I find it an exciting opportunity to interject our passion of why we love the business into not just the marketing technique for one plant or one variety, but a marketing strategy for the horticulture industry in its entirety!



Rajvir Prasher

Age: 34

Title: Head Grower

Operation: DeVry Greenhouses Ltd.

Chilliwack, British Columbia, Canada

We as human beings are often attracted to new-and-improved items that seem to be present everywhere and for good reason. Psychologically, we have an unconscious desire for things that are new, or appear new, and often regardless of any significant change.

I believe two common narratives in consumerism that are driving this trend of buying new and improved items are: 1) If it's new, it must be better; and 2) that one must stay current to stay relevant.

New products are always becoming available, often with the caption "New and Improved," but have you ever stopped to wonder why? If the old product worked fine and met my needs, how much more "new and improved" can the product be? Does this also mean that the product I'm currently using is useless?

Usually the case isn't that the old product is obsolete, but more so that the new product is just that—new—and therefore must be better. In addition, new products can often appear trendy or stylish since they're different than the items that came before them.

Today with the use of social media, change and trends in our world are happening more rapidly, especially as information is instantaneously communicated across great distances to a multitude of people. Because of this, we're more aware of what's new and trendy, and therefore, have social pressures to update and change with the trends. Often this can create a false illusion that old products are no longer of value or desire.

We need to use these same methods to promote the old varieties with social media, horticulture shows, etc. Old and existing varieties carry great potential and we have to be constantly aware of this potential and use it for what it is. To illustrate, describing a picture where the item is the centerpiece that holds everything together or by promoting it as the star pupil that doesn't fail.

On a more practical side, I think it comes down to information, as does most things. People need to see the benefits and potential of the products. Often we have grower instructions on tags, but why not add various uses or another piece of info? For example, when you buy a box of rice you get both the instructions of how to cook it, but also a sample meal to turn your simple product into an elegant meal. We need to give the consumers more than what they're asking for to keep them constantly interested and to show them the potential in a product they'll see time and time again.

The greatest weakness of bread-and-butter items is also their greatest strength—the fact that they're reliable, quality products that will be around for a long time. The benefit of these items is often their versatility through security. These items have been tried and tested and have proven themselves to be reliable and secure, and therefore can be utilized to their fullest potential in various different uses, settings and designs.

As consumers who have seen these products many times before, we've become complacent and short-sighted of the benefits and value that these items bring. I believe in promoting these items for what they truly are, highlighting the reasons why they've been around so long and why they'll continue to be around for years to come.

When I think of what a home is, I think of a familiar place, a constant in my life where I can be at peace, as I know there will be little or no surprises, dependable. These are the same things that work in favor of the bread-and-butter

items, but without a constant reminder it's easy to take it all for granted, just as we do our own homes.

Existing varieties give customers a feeling of dependability. They know how the plants will perform, as they've been around for years and have all of the "kinks" worked out of them. Growers know their growth habit, disease and pest issues, as well as the longevity of the plant. As growers, we want to keep these plants relevant, as they provide a sense of nostalgia and heritage to the customer, like their parents or grandparents may have had this plant as part of their lives.

Lastly, scientifically speaking, we also both need and want to keep the old varieties, as they provide a genetic database for the newer varieties to fight pests and disease, and to create even more of the same genus. The more a plant is bred, the riskier it gets as we narrow the spectrum of available genetics.

With more information at an avid consumer's fingertips, and an increased involvement in the long-term ethics of their purchase, promoting the overall sustainability of a genus could become a key selling point for a customer. **GT**