

GROWERTALKS

Acres & Acres

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Looking Distinguished

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I wouldn't say I've distinguished myself in any particular way in my horticultural literary career, other than having stuck around long enough to become part of the "remember when?" crowd. As in "Remember when Goldsmith used to give out t-shirts at their Pack Trial?" (I believe it was Jeannie Svob who once joked, "You know you've been in the industry too long when you own two dozen Goldsmith shirts ... and you never even worked for Goldsmith.")

Amazingly, however, I was recently bestowed with a signal honor: the title "Distinguished Lecturer" for the Ellison Chair in International Floriculture Distinguished Lecture Series at Texas A&M University. Professor Charlie Hall did the inviting; I can only assume I will be the last Distinguished Lecturer, as he has truly scraped the bottom of the proverbial barrel!

I made that same joke, and several others, during my one-hour talk to an audience that was mostly academics and a few grad students and the committee members, some of whom are growers. Hardly my usual industry crowd, so I didn't want to do my usual trends talk. I mean, what would a vice-chancellor or a Ph.D. potato breeder do with "A dozen clever displays made from wood pallets"? Instead, I focused on a brief history, some current thoughts and some untapped niches that I think offer potential.

To start, I borrowed from former ANLA chief Bob Dolibois and pointed out that we can easily look back into floriculture's past and identify the big trends in decade-long periods—cuts up to WWII, bedding plants in the '50s and '60s, foliage in the '70s, plugs and automation in the '80s, big boxes and vegetative annuals in the '90s and branding in the 2000s—but the last decade has revealed dozens of trends with none standing out as dominant. You might say labor ... but what about veggies, cannabis, efficiency, sustainability, trucking ... ? Experts seem to agree that change comes faster and more frequently than ever before. Which is why, I told the audience, it's hard to know where to steer your business, since there are so many challenges and so many opportunities.

What are some of those opportunities?

- Having a more broad-based offering. Not just plants, but better service, superior logistics, an amazing web presence and so on.
- Doing a better job preaching the many benefits of plants. We know them, but our customers don't. Who'll finally figure out how to get that message across effectively?

- Helping customers get past their fear of failure. Make them successful so they get hooked and buy more.

I mentioned three cool business ideas that seem to be taking off: Plant Nite (learn-to-plant events that feature fun, fellowship and adult beverages), Gardenuity (a subscription plant delivery service) and Bower & Branch (an online tree and shrub supplier). These businesses make gardening fun, easy, convenient and personal.

I spoke a bit about how the high-tech realm—biopharming, vertical farms, cannabis, MIT’s “Food Computer”—might attract new young employees who want to combine computers or technology with plant growing.

I stole Anna Ball’s favorite line, “For every trend there is a counter-trend,” to illustrate that you don’t have to go after the latest shiny object to be successful. That if you’re a small business, you should be a “boutique” business. And that mind-blowing service is rarer than hen’s teeth and much more appealing. (Example: Apple customer returned a new iPad with a post-it saying, “Wife said no.” They send him one at no charge with a post-it that said, “Apple says yes.”)

I waxed poetic on my favorite topic, storytelling, pointing out that every business and every product has a story, and that telling that story in a compelling, interesting fashion can skyrocket you to success.

Lastly, in a nod to my ag economist host, I pointed that floriculture is suffering from a dearth of data and that we need more good economists and number-crunchers to help us quantify what we do.

Of course, not being a numbers person myself, I closed with a Richard Branson quote that fits me to a T: “I rely far more on gut instinct than researching huge amounts of statistics.”

All in all, it was great fun being a distinguished lecturer, but a lot of pressure, too. I’m just hoping I got a passing grade. **GT**