

GROWERTALKS

Features

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Advocacy Advantage

Jennifer Zurko



Bert Lemkes: Tri-Hishtil—Mills River, North Carolina

Member for over 20 years (when AmericanHort was known as OFA); Premium Member since 2016

GrowerTalks: *Why do you think it's important to be a member of AmericanHort?*

Bert Lemkes: It is extremely important to have a voice in Washington. If that can't be your specific, individual voice, then at least contribute to those that can translate our concerns and interests in Washington, D.C. It doesn't matter if it's for landscapers, greenhouses, garden centers—there's so much overlap. For the greater agriculture circle, everywhere it's the same concern and that is labor.

GT: *How did it make the organization better when it changed over from OFA, merging with ANLA and adding the advocacy strength?*

BL: It was a good thing. We have to make sure that our interests, our economic contributions, employment—you name it—is influenced one way or another by what happens at the federal level. And AmericanHort has played a very important role in maneuvering the right way with the different state farm bureaus and the American Farm Bureau, which hasn't always been easy. But I think, in the long run, all of these efforts by AmericanHort will come up with the best long-term result.



GT: *How long have you been a member of AmericanHort/OFA?*

BL: When I came over to the United States in 1987 [Bert was born in the Netherlands], I worked for Art Van Wingerden and I know at that time Van Wingerden International was a member of OFA. When I became part of the ownership in 1997, I became a member myself. And I'm still a member with Tri-Hishtil.

GT: *For someone who's new to the industry, why should they be a member of AmericanHort?*

BL: Obviously, going to Cultivate is very important. It's a great place to meet people and to see new things happening in the industry. However, I think from a business vision point of view you need to think about how the interests of the industry are represented. And you can, obviously, be active at the local level, at the state level, but at the federal level, it quickly becomes a lot and you don't see the immediate benefits if you do it all yourself. So that's

where being a member of an organization that stands for the industry's interests is very important.

GT: *What would you say to someone who may have been a member back in the OFA days, but they let their membership lapse? Why is it important for them to be a part of it again?*

BL: First of all, AmericanHort is more active and more focused on representing us on the national level, so that's different than how [OFA] was. And I think society has changed. Twenty years ago, there were some labor issues, but it was small. But now, it's a bigger issue and it has to do with demographics, the average birthrate, and the number of available people to do the work—so it's different. And if you were a member of OFA before, I think it's very important to get more involved—not necessarily time-wise, but you can delegate part of that to AmericanHort and you can be assured that the interests of the industry are represented.

GT: *Why do you think it's important for greenhouse and garden center owners to bring their staff to AmericanHort events like Cultivate?*

BL: Obviously, a business is nothing without its customers, its employees and its suppliers. It's the people. And if you go to Cultivate, you will see a lot of your suppliers and, maybe in certain cases, customers. So it's the ability to have those connections. And depending on the size of the business and how far away you are from Columbus, you can send members of your management team to have them interact directly with suppliers, vendors and potentially pick up on new ideas.

With events like the Plug & Cutting Conference, I've always been able to visit a lot of different greenhouses and I always thought it was the best thing to do because you can share ideas and you always pick up something new when you go and visit another place. It's a unique way to get into those places.

GT: *Are there things that AmericanHort does for its members that maybe a lot of people don't know about?*

BL: If you become a Premium Member, there are definitely things that the average AmericanHort member does not have access to. The support that you can get if you have issues on legal areas—like if you want to get into H-2A or if you have questions on certain rules or regulations on the federal level when it comes to employment—it's nice to be able to go and have an exchange of ideas with CJ-Lake [the legal firm who contracts with AmericanHort].

GT: *AmericanHort helped coordinate for you to actually testify on immigration reform in front of Congress in 2010, right?*

BL: Yeah, that was a very interesting opportunity and it was beautiful for an immigrant that became a U.S. citizen to be able to do that.

GT: *The needle hasn't really moved that much, but do you think you got through to a couple of congresspeople? What was your takeaway?*

BL: (laughs) You look back and you say, "Nothing has happened." I think a lot has happened and still needs to happen. H-2A is not my preferred solution, but it has definitely taken off. I think also other actions within the current and previous administrations are making it more and more clear that something really needs to be done long-term because all we do is we address little or big fires short-term. But we need to come up with a solution that can give us a clear path for the next 20 to 30 years and then constantly review that as we go forward. I would like to see a comprehensive plan for immigration that can guide us in the future.

GT: *Bert, why is advocacy for our industry so important?*

BL: The whole discussion about immigration—and "immigration" is just a word for a much broader encompassing area of our national political theater right now—it's something that touches us in many different ways and I think it's

very important to have our elected officials know that we need a clear vision for the future of our country when it comes to immigration. And I think this country needs more people with the willingness to help and develop our economy. When you talk immigration, it's confusing when it's directly connected to refugees. That's part of it, but that's not what immigration stands for.

As an immigrant myself, I feel blessed in many different ways for having been able to come here and I was lucky enough to get a green card. And I was very happy to become a U.S. citizen. There is so much potential in this country. Immigration is an integral part of the economic growth of our country and that's where I think it's so important that we as an industry have a clear voice. We need labor and we need to make sure that we have it—not just for today, but also for tomorrow. **GT**

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