

GROWERTALKS

Features

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Five for the Future

YGA Finalists

What NEW business qualities will today's growers and retailers need to possess in order to thrive over the next 20 years? That's the question we posed to our five bright, talented Young Grower Award finalists.

Being a professional grower in the floriculture industry takes passion, energy, determination ... and all too often long hours of hard work. That's why *GrowerTalks* magazine, with the generous help of Ball Seed, BASF and OFA, has for four years sponsored the annual Young Grower Award competition. We wanted to recognize and reward those young (under 35) greenhouse growers who are dedicated to crop production. They may come from small businesses where they have to be Jacks or Jills of all trades. They may be a section grower for a mega greenhouse. Or they may work for a small retail grower and spend some of their time helping customers. It doesn't matter which—the common thread between them all is their passion for growing plants.

We accepted nominations for this year's award until March. In April the editors gathered all the applications and letters of recommendation and sorted through them, arguing and debating the merits of education vs. industry service. It was tough, but we somehow narrowed the field to the five finalists you're meeting today.

Once we notified them of their finalist status, we had the fun of assigning them an essay assignment—yes, just like back in high school. Except this had nothing to do with summer vacation. And it came right at the beginning of May, when the last thing any of them had was spare time (we figured time management is a necessary skill for a good grower, so their reaction to the extra work was part of the assignment—all passed with flying colors.)

We asked them the question above: What NEW business qualities will today's growers need to possess in order to thrive over the next 20 years? It's a question every greenhouse owner and grower should be asking. Hopefully these Gen-X growers will provide some insights to you.

Our esteemed panel of judges—Anna Ball, CEO of Ball Horticultural Co.; Bobby Barnitz, co-owner of Bob's Market in West Virginia and current president of OFA; Dr. Allen Hammer, *GrowerTalks* columnist, former Purdue professor and now technical specialist for Dummen USA; Steve Larson, Turf & Ornamental Sales Specialist for BASF; and Mike Maran, the 2007 Young Grower Award winner and now head grower for Telly's Greenhouse in Michigan—will use the applications, these essays and phone interviews with all the finalists to pick the winner. He or she will be recognized at the awards ceremony Saturday, July 12, at the OFA Short Course in Columbus, Ohio. The winner will also be the focus of the cover story of the September *GrowerTalks*.

But enough details. Read on!

The finalists' essays

Eddie Barrow

Age: 31

Title: Perennial Grower

Operation: Whiteford Road Greenhouse
Toledo, Ohio

Growers always need to be developing new and cutting-edge ideas to stay fresh in the market. My main interest lies in plant development, combined with varied growing techniques. I find it valuable to track sales records as well as planting dates very carefully. This allows me to reassess a plan that's ineffective, and it indicates what ideas are working so I may follow these same trends in the future. Replacing primrose with Lewisia, which has the advantage of being a long-blooming perennial and houseplant, is one such change I've made.

I merchandise "eye-popping" plants that will attract anyone driving by. Utilizing these plants, sales numbers have increased. I don't rely on sale signs; I grow plants that sell themselves based on size, color and maturity. I display new, rare and exciting plants that draw the customer's attention. I focus on the "wow factor" to compel gardeners to simply grab what draws their attention. Using this technique, I gain word-of-mouth advertising. The best recommendation a grower can get is one from a satisfied customer.

I like to merchandise plants in a garden-like setting. For instance, hosta are the No. 1-selling perennial. Why not combine them with their favorite companions? By displaying hosta with heuchera, ferns and other woodland plants, you allow the consumer to envision what their garden will look like. By constantly changing my displays I give the gardener new ideas that will enhance their garden season after season.

Over the past 12 years I've increased the number of available plants from 900 to more than 2,000, including perennials, annuals, trees, shrubs and rarities. Having so many varieties allows me to cater to every gardener. This large selection allows the consumer to utilize the entire growing season, from March to November. I can grow plants hard in the winter that will take late frosts to satisfy the early-bird gardener, as well as fresh crops for the late summer and fall blooming season.

Crop cycles are a grower's best friend. Having the ability to manipulate plants is key to a successful business. Using the knowledge I've gained to influence blooming times, I'm able to accommodate my gardeners' needs. It's possible to supply my customers with plants I've cultivated to grow in the desired season. For example, with Lewisia, I can manage the light and temperature to affect bloom time. With rudbeckia, I focus more on germination and transplant dates along with specific timing of growth regulators and extended lighting for optimal bloom time.

The principles that launched my previous six generations into success cannot be ignored. My new techniques accompanied with the old-style friendly and knowledgeable customer service is what keeps the customer base coming back. Excited floor staff and a quality, truly well-grown product is the basis of a successful

grower's greenhouse that will continue to thrive over the next 20 years. -*Eddie Barrow*

Nancy Gambino

Age: 29

Title: Vice President

Operation: Arte Verde Garden Center and Landscape Co.

Poplar Grove, Illinois

In order to succeed over the next 20 years, I feel the growers must possess three of the following qualities:

Quality, quality, quality ... did I say quality? I personally feel that this is the No. 1 essential key to success. A true gardener will know if your garden center is worth returning to or not. The facial expressions on our guests' faces are my greatest feedback. Not only is it the "wow!" response that I hear, but also when I learn how far they've driven to get the product. The secret is simple: add one more plug to a basket, a little bit more fertilizer, cut it back and you won't be sorry. Quality, variety, and those hard-to-find plants help to eliminate competitors. The people who know plants and appreciate the quality will be back for more. Another added benefit, they can't price compare, because nothing will compare to what you are selling. Exciting, I know!

Another important aspect of a successful business is customer care. Starting at the front entrance, make sure you and your team greet the guests with a simple, "hello, how are you today?" and "thank you, happy planting!" If there's someone available to help load the car, then do it. It's that extra step that makes all the difference. Some garden centers are very large and overwhelming, so helping your guest navigate through the aisles signifies customer care. Although signs may be posted everywhere, they're sometimes hard to find because the flowers cause a distraction. Realize that giving them a little bit of your time can go a long way. Customer care also includes being a good listener. Listen to what the customer has to say. Whether it's good or bad, all comments should be heard and processed. Your guests know what they want and since they are our bread and butter, we should probably listen to what they have to say.

Educate your team and your guests. Knowledge is power. Your team is an investment, not an expense. Teach them and you will have a great return on your investment. The team doesn't need to have every single answer, but they should know how to use the resources that are available to them. Not only should your team be educated on plants, but so should the guests. Host workshops and seminars that help create more knowledgeable gardeners. Educating them will increase their confidence about planting. When they have succeeded in one planting bed, they create more planting beds. Not only are we creating better gardeners, we are encouraging them to come back and spend more money.

Given all your behind-the-scenes processes are flowing smoothly (i.e. ordering, inventory, pricing, etc), your success lies in the core of your day-to-day actions. Supply your guests with quality, care and knowledge, and fear not the business next door!

That's what I think it will take to thrive over the next 20 years. -*Nancy Gambino*

Zoltan Kovacs

Age: 34

Title: Vice President Operations

Operation: Sunny Border Nurseries

Kensington, Connecticut

Favorite Crops to Grow: “Any new plants not in the market yet, which makes it exciting to learn about before anybody else.”

Professional horticulture has changed considerably in the past five years, and I see it changing even faster in the next 20 years. Barriers have fallen, markets have changed and efficiencies are sharper. Growers need skills beyond growing to stay competitive—skills in communications, marketing, international affairs and new technologies affect large and small growers alike. And all this comes on top of mastering growing techniques, chemical application, crop management and quality control.

A successful grower has international access to plants to assist in meeting the need for new, interesting varieties. In my own experience, working with international plant agents and breeders around the world has been essential in helping me stay on top of trends and bring the best material available to the market.

A keen awareness of product branding throughout the industry is also becoming more and more important in order to stay competitive. Growers need to consistently produce product that satisfies consumer demand, whether it be old perennial favorites that remain popular or new varieties and plant programs that “wow” the Gen X and Gen Y buyers. The recent surge of programs like those promoting durable groundcovers is a good example of the product branding in the forefront of today’s market. We need to respond accordingly.

Responding to the environmental needs we face at this time is also essential if we are to move forward as responsible growers. At Sunny Border, we grow and distribute green roof modules throughout the northeast and have been doing so for a few years. It’s very rewarding knowing our product promotes a healthier environment while aiding in storm water management, pollution reduction and energy and heating conservation. Environmental initiatives like these will inevitably help our industry thrive over the next 20 years, in addition to the obvious environmental benefits.

As a grower, I feel it’s my responsibility not only to produce exceptional crops but also to help produce a new generation of growers through mentoring and providing opportunities to those wanting to learn more about this exciting industry. There’s also a responsibility to constantly improve on your growing processes and finding better ways to get the job done.

It’s also important for every grower to keep on top of short- and long-term growing programs. The minute you let a program run on “autopilot” you’re in trouble. With work, my colleagues and I have made Sunny Border’s “Bodacious Temperennial” program a success. But we never take it for granted. We constantly look for new varieties that fit with the program’s trend-setting style.

In the coming years, it will be key for growers to continue to modernize operations to make them more efficient and, in turn, more profitable for the long haul. It seems many businesses in this industry live paycheck to paycheck and efficiency is the best way out of that hole. In order for all of us to succeed in the future, I believe our job is to recognize talent and mold quality employees, while also bettering business practices to help our business and the industry in general. -Zolton Kovaks

Jill West

Age: 31

Title: Grower

Operation: D.S. Cole Growers

Loudon, New Hampshire

With energy and labor costs on the rise, the most important quality today's grower can have is the ability to go "back to basics," but with a twist. With all the technology and information at our disposal, we have the potential to produce crops in a lean and efficient manner. Yet too often that's not the case. Growers today are a little disconnected from the dollars and sense of our decisions. "How much does it really cost to space that petunia one more time, and can the same quality plant be produced by altering my strategy?" It's imperative for growers to understand all aspects of the business in order to survive in the future, which includes cost-accounting knowledge and more efficient crop planning and scheduling, as well as good growing skills. It's even more important to know how to combine those skills with the technology to do it most efficiently.

Never more so than today has the need to truly know what we're putting into our crops been apparent. Historically in our industry, we've become comfortable with a level of "waste" that we won't be able to sustain in the future. Continually raising our own prices to compensate for increased costs is tempting, but our customers are also feeling the pinch. We need to be more profitable by being more efficient. Using simple cost-accounting methods to learn what individual crops truly cost to produce will allow growers to be smarter about what and how much they grow. We can't grow things just because they're fun. We have to learn what we're most efficient at producing and build on it to be profitable in the future.

With the advent of computerized environmental controls, we have the capability of greatly reducing production costs, yet many growers don't utilize the technology to the greatest advantage. In an effort to be all things to all people, we often pack our greenhouses full of an impressive assortment of materials and finish them all in the exact same climate, forcing the use of growth retardants and other chemical treatments that diminish an already too-slim profit margin. With better crop planning and scheduling, growers can take full advantage of what computerized climate control has to offer: different microclimate zones, DIF and specialized irrigation, all of which reduce disease and insect pressure and allows us to spray less and reduce energy costs in the process.

When chemical applications are necessary, the choices today are more specialized and safer. Understanding proper rotation strategies and application times can actually reduce the amount of chemical needed, especially when combined with an IPM program. It takes a small time commitment to find out what you have in your greenhouse, but the payoff can be significant in the amount of money saved on reduced chemical applications.

In order to survive the shrinking profit margins our industry now faces, growers will have to expand their understanding of the business beyond growing technique. We need to continually incorporate new technologies available to us and use them to produce high quality crops as efficiently as possible. *-Jill West*

Davy Wright

Age: 29

Title: Vice President

Operation: Wright's Nursery and Greenhouse Inc.

Plantersville, Alabama

Favorite Crop to Grow: "Perennials. It's a fun crop category with lots of different challenges and diversity."

Discipline and courage have driven our business for the past 43 years. My father, David, has shown the discipline to be honest and fair to his customers and employees, as well as shown the courage to take risks. While these qualities will continue to drive our business forward, we must meet a new challenge with a more sophisticated generation of consumers. To do this, we must look beyond being a grower only and include other core business qualities that have been less important in the past.

Marketing has become a mainstay for our business, and our campaign targets the consumer. Here in Alabama, we saw a concern from consumers and the state Department of Agriculture about where food products originated. In response to this we trademarked "Alabama Grown" and began promoting our brand to the end consumer. This simple marketing campaign has helped us support our customers and follow through with our products to the end consumer gardens.

Creative minds can overcome any obstacle man or Mother Nature throws our way. This past year our area has seen the worst drought in decades, but it's not the first nor last time we'll see these conditions. We must create and communicate ways of gardening that both conserve natural resources and benefit our environment and economy. It troubles me to see our industry labeled as a "water waster" when so much of the environmental cycle rests on the landscapes and plants created by our industry. In many cities the landscapes installed by the green industry are the only green spaces in sight among the miles of rooftops and asphalt. Clean air and water are the keys to good health; too bad some folks don't realize where the cleaning part comes from—plants, not Mr. Clean.

Moving past being just a grower and running your business successfully will require a financial ability above and beyond the call of duty. No matter what your business focus is—retail, independent wholesale or mass-market wholesale—margins have and will continue to shrink. Knowing your operation's cash flow on a day-to-day basis and not relying on how much money is in the bank at the end of the year will help conserve cash flow and minimize wasted dollars. This will also prove successful during this current slow economic cycle.

Technology continues to evolve and we will need to evolve with it. Using new technologies and lean flow can increase efficiencies from our current labor and greenhouse space. Back in 1987 with a new Apple IIe, we began a lean flow order-pulling system that we still use today. While some technologies may work flawlessly, others can be a nightmare to get started. Weigh the benefits of new technologies before replacing older proven systems. Our 1996 Flier transplanter is a great example of a proven technology that could be replaced by faster equipment. But the capacity of a new system would be greater than needed and the benefits don't outweigh the investment.

Growers of tomorrow will continue to be successful by meeting the needs of tomorrow's consumers. -Davy Wright