

GROWERTALKS

Cover Story

8/15/2008

The American Dream

Chris Beytes



Zoltan Kovacs has a fascinating background. Born and raised under the former communist regime in Hungary (which ended in 1988), he came to the United States as a 22-year-old horticulture exchange student with a passion for perennials.

Today, a short 13 years later, he's vice president of operations for Sunny Border Nurseries, an \$8 million, seven-location perennial business in Connecticut. And at July's OFA Short Course he was named the winner of GrowerTalks' 2008 Young Grower Award. Oh, and he'll soon be an American citizen. And he's engaged to be married. Quite a list of achievements for a young man who, when he first arrived

here in 1995, only knew two words of English: "yes" and "no."

"Passionate" is a word many people use to describe Zoltan. Sioux Mackey, the Sunny Border sales manager who nominated him, wrote, "I feel compelled to nominate Zoltan because he is passionate about his job and amazed by all life has to offer. He has a clear vision of the strides he wants to make as a grower, and his confidence and experience will surely take him there." Our five Young Grower Award judges agreed with Sioux. All cited Zoltan's passion and enthusiasm, along with his unique life story, as key reasons he came out ahead of the other four finalists.

We asked Zoltan to recount the early days of his career in America and his rapid rise at Sunny Border, and to help those of us who are a bit jaded to regain our appreciation for how good we have it.

On his first years in America:

I came in 1995 as an exchange student, as part of a program called Worldwide Farmers Exchange, which is through universities. They send people to work for one year in big nurseries, or horticulture or livestock—anything in the horticulture or agriculture fields.

I told my mother the day before I left for America that I was leaving for a year. She really didn't like that.

I started as a student for like \$2 an hour, \$4 overtime, because that's what the student program was paying us. I started at a very, very old growing division at Mahoney's [Garden Center] in Woburn [Massachusetts],

which was actually demolished a long time ago. They moved me to their main location a few miles away, Winchester, which is a 14-acre retail store, and I started to work there. After the year was over, I left and went back to Hungary.

At first, when I came to this country I hated it. After a year I went home and said I never want to come back. But then when I went back to Hungary I started to appreciate what I had here, and so then I wanted to come back. So I came back. I still didn't know if I wanted to stay or not. It took me a couple of years, but I decided yes, I want to proceed with my life here, not at home. It was challenging, because of the language, you don't know the system, you come from an old eastern European country where the system is completely different ... you have to learn pretty much everything from scratch.

Back at Mahoney's:

While at Mahoney's I had become a friend with one of their department managers, and he wanted me to come back. So I came back through another student program, through the University of Minnesota, as an exchange student.

[The department manager] really liked the job I was doing and he wanted me to run the perennial department for him. He went to talk to the Mahoney family. But they had really serious doubts about me because I was just a student and I was very young. But he got what he wanted and I started to run the perennial department, and it became really successful. Within, I think, two years, we jumped from \$500,000 sales to \$750,000 from that one store. That's how I started my journey at Mahoney's.

I was running that department, and the roses, for like three years. Then they asked me to do the greenhouses, then herbs—pretty much everything but trees and shrubs I was running at the end. And I was involved in all the perennial buying, storewide, for their eight retail stores.

After like six, seven years I really didn't like retail as much any more because it was such long hours. One year I think I calculated 68 hours average per week for the whole year.

On joining Sunny Border:

In 2003 I left Mahoney's. I told them I wanted to do only growing, I didn't want to do retail. They were really understanding; they said no problem. I told them the company I was going to and gave notice, but left on very friendly terms. I wanted to get out of retail. All I wanted to do was grow perennials.

Sunny Border had been asking me for three years prior to that if I wanted to come work for them. They said if I was ever looking for a job I could talk to them because they were looking for perennial people.

I started at Sunny Border at a really basic level as a grower and program manager. I had to build a couple of programs. One was the large-pot program, two-gallon perennials; and the Temperennial program. Both became really successful within one season.

The second or third year, I took over the entire production. Then in my fourth year things were going good, so they offered me the position of vice president of operations—it was really quick.

On his rapid rise:

"It was actually pretty easy because the changes I made were, to me, really obvious changes. I made a lot of things work for them, like changing the propagation so we didn't lose 30% of our cuttings—we have 99% success.

I don't know, I guess I just had a good feel for it—what to change and how to change it. Like the Temperennial program, a small department, became a major player at Sunny Border, with sales of \$3 or \$4 million in three years.

On why he, and European growers in general, are obsessed with plant quality:

You know why that is? If you go to Holland, to the Auction, if the plant is not 100% quality, they'll return it and you have to dump it. Even if an astilbe has a single yellow leaf, it gets dumped. So it's very important to provide the best quality to your customers.

I don't know how to put it so that it doesn't offend some people, but that's why I never want to work for a box-store grower. Millions of plants, plug and ship, plug and ship ... I never wanted to do that. Quality is second rate; the first thing for them is numbers.

Sunny Border does not sell to box stores. Actually, that was one of the criteria for me accepting the job here. Which is kind of an old-fashioned mentality, somewhat, but it was important to me.

On the idea of going back to Hungary and starting a nursery:

I'm pretty sure that if you would open a nice nursery [in Hungary] you could make really nice money and live a comfortable life. Except, I no longer look at Hungary as my home, I look at America as my home. I really don't want to go back. Even though probably I could have a little bit better life at home, but I just don't want to go back. I love my life here.

On his passion and optimism:

I am very optimistic because I have it so good here. I mean, why wouldn't I be optimistic? I'm healthy, I have a great job, I make a decent living, I'm going to get married soon. What the hell do I have to complain about?

On our industry's tendency to complain:

Our industry is famous about that! None of the year is good enough for us. I mean, have you ever heard anybody in this industry say, "Hey, we had the best year ever. I'm satisfied." They always say, "We had a good year, but we could have had this, that ..." They always look at what they didn't have. I've never heard a single grower or retail garden center say they've had the best year ever and are very happy. No. It's always "June wasn't that great, because two weekends it was raining and we could have had better sales ..." It's never good enough.

On reminding his American friends how good they have it:

I do that all the time. I think I can be kind of obnoxious (laughs) ... Like, I have a friend with two boats. And he'll say, "Oh, we're so poor." And I'm like, oh my God, you have no idea what poor means. Somebody who has two boats and three cars? Don't tell me you're poor! It's just too much for me!