Being a professional grower in the floriculture industry takes passion, energy, determination … and all too often long hours of hard work. That’s why, for the last five years, GrowerTalks magazine, with the generous help of Ball Seed and OFA, has sponsored the annual Young Grower Award competition. We want to recognize and reward those young (under 35) greenhouse growers who are dedicated to crop production.

Our finalists each received an essay assignment, given at the height of spring busy season. (We’re happy to report that each of these young growers displayed excellent time management skills and met their deadlines with enthusiasm.) You can read their responses on the following pages.

For the first time ever, we have two finalists from the same greenhouse, Costa Farms in Florida. We were at first a bit unsure if we should do this, but the quality of their applications made it impossible to ignore these two young talents. Hopefully, if one wins, he won’t hold it over the other too obnoxiously or for too long!

A panel of special judges will choose the 2009 Young Grower Award winner based on their nomination applications, their final essays and a phone interview. Judges include:

- **Anna Ball**, Ball Horticultural Company
- **P. Allen Hammer**, Dummen Young Plants and Professor Emeritus, Purdue University
- **Bobby Barnitz**, Bob’s Market, Mason, West Virginia, and current OFA president
- **Zoltan Kovaks**, 2008 Young Grower Award winner, Sunny Borders Nursery, Kensington, Connecticut

The winner will be announced during a special ceremony, July 11, 2009, at the OFA Short Course in Columbus, Ohio. Look for a feature article on the winner in the September issue of GrowerTalks, as well.

What will you learn from this recession to help your growing operation run that much more cost-effectively? And how will you implement that?
Mike Merida | Costa Farms

We, as a country, and even worldwide, are experiencing tough economic times. However, I honestly have to say that due to our extremely strong and passionate team at Costa Farms, we’ve been able to have quite a successful spring so far this year. But this has not occurred by relying on our previous achievements. We have taken strategic measures as a company to preserve our profit margins by scrutinizing every cost that goes into producing a single plant. This has enabled us to be where we are today. Price increases in fuel, fertilizers, pesticides, pots, soil and minimum wage have put us in a position to react and adapt. It has driven us to come up with feasible strategies to keep us profitable while providing the customers with the quality of plants they come to expect from the Costa Farms brand.

The driving force in running this operation as smoothly and efficiently as possible is labor. Without the hard work and dedication of our farm crews, our ideas and expectations could not be met. At the same time, this driving force comes at a significant cost. As a team, we have worked diligently with our personnel to increase efficiency with fewer personnel and reduced hours without sacrificing product quality. To do this, we have implemented mandated trainings concerning moisture management, farm machinery maintenance, pest and disease identification seminars and safety trainings. The continuing education of our workers has created a conscientious understanding of the initiatives and mission our company is striving to meet.

For instance, the moisture management training encompasses the team members responsible for making a decision to irrigate under the grower’s guidance. This training allowed for the adoption of moisture levels after a thorough check of the field. This simple lead measure is quite cost-effective in that it reduces the chance for disease development as a result of overwatering (i.e., savings on fungicides and dumping of diseased plants). It also prevents the excessive leaching of fertilizer, which saves on additional fertilizer applications. And finally, it can help save on diesel costs by decreasing the amount of times the irrigation pumps are turned on.

Other key components in lowering our fixed costs are the strategic methods used to control the spectrum of pests and diseases that call South Florida home. The vast amount of acreage utilized for our foliage production can have a profound effect on our profit margin. Therefore, the use of pesticides and other chemicals must have a sound usage strategy. The experience and knowledge of our team of growers enables us to utilize our applications based on timely applications to prevent outbreaks of either pests or diseases. The use of generic products, clean stock, field scouts and well-trained applicators allows for the integrated pest management of the operation to be cost effective. Due to the volume of plants grown in our operation, it’s imperative to have a well-trained team of field scouts to catch potential outbreaks and react as swiftly as possible. The attention to detail in this aspect of plant production has a dramatic effect on cost savings for our company.

In this dynamic business, it’s imperative to react and adapt to be successful. We at Costa Farms are driven by our passion to keep producing quality plants while continuing to be profitable. I can honestly say that in these tough economic times the challenge put forth is one that has motivated me and the rest of our production team to think outside the box and follow-up on our goals. We do expect, with continued diligence, to remain successful in this industry.
As I thought about a theme for this essay, one of my grandmother’s phrases kept coming back to me—“An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.” Looking back over the last several growing seasons, it seems to me that the small mistakes and inefficiencies that occur daily in a greenhouse are easily overlooked when the economy is booming. When plants are going out the door as fast as you can produce them, what does it matter that you had to apply extra pesticide because you failed to notice an infestation, or that the timing of a crop was off and therefore extra pinching and spacing was needed? All of these mistakes cost the business money, and while they seem of little consequence when all is going well, in tough economic times, they begin to be glaringly apparent.

I believe that what’s needed in the greenhouse industry in general, and in my own range in particular, is more attention paid to that ounce of prevention. There’s little cost associated with avoiding problems, while curing them usually comes with a hefty price tag. Making this maxim a policy will make a big difference now, when times are hard, and will carry on to greater success as the economy improves.

One area in particular that could stand improvement in most greenhouses is record keeping. Everyone tends to think that their memory of an event will stay as fresh as it was when the event has just occurred. This may be true for several weeks or months, but in reality, after a year or two, especially after repeats of the same crop, the little details can escape us. Big mistakes will certainly stand out, but smaller ones such as timing or nutrition issues may not occur to us until the mistake has been repeated. Taking the time, each day or each week, to make notes and observations on each crop in the greenhouse will give a solid base of information for the next season. As the number and variety of plants that are produced increases, it also allows all of the growers in an operation to share their experiences and knowledge.

Another place where improvement is easily attained is in chemical application. Growers now have the tools to suppress or eliminate many of the major greenhouse pests and diseases and to stop or modify the growth of almost any plant. These are wonderful and important additions to our arsenal, but only if they don’t become substitutes for good growing practices. Regular preventative applications of pesticides may help to catch unseen pests, but a better alternative is applying the IPM practices of monitoring and observing crops for specific problems. With diligence, most potential problems can be caught and corrected before the economic threshold is reached, saving the greenhouse from the waste of costly pesticides applied with no real need. This system will also help to prevent pest resistance, which is becoming an increasingly important issue.

It’s all too easy, especially in the busy spring months, to let things slide in the greenhouse: to spray a general pesticide on every plant, to skip the everyday routine of examining each crop, to neglect your grower notes again this week; and even with all due diligence, mistakes and problems are certainly going to arise. However, if we take this recession as an opportunity to make some improvements in the production sides of our operations, they will be reflected in the quality of the plants we produce and in the strength of our bottom line. Once the economy begins to heat up again, the benefits of increased efficiency and fewer mistakes will
be even greater. All we need is that ounce of prevention.

**Alex Diaz | Costa Farms**

Whether it’s in times of recession or times of prosperity, the running of any successful business depends on the same factors: a quality product, efficient systems, well organized teams, skilled workers and talented leadership, just to name a few. In the operation I’m fortunate to be a part of, we’re always looking for ways to improve our quality and at the same time maximize our profitability. The current economic state certainly has made us focus more on the efficiencies of labor and the details of production. Namely, produce a high-quality crop by streamlining our systems. Secondly, build quality labor teams to implement these systems. And thirdly, use technology to process large amounts of data, enabling us to make decisions that allow us to produce the best crop possible.

The most exciting and rewarding part of being a grower is the feeling of pride and accomplishment one feels when a successful crop leaves the nursery. In our particular nursery we focus on tropical foliage. We have many different varieties that require specific attention. In addition, our foliage production crop times vary anywhere from six months to over a year. This being the case, many variables can affect the crop. How we group our plants, the irrigation method we use and the pest control used, are just some of the systems we’re continually working on to maximize cost efficiency. This part of the business requires a lot of hard work and constant attention to the requirements of each particular crop. The good thing about this job, though, is that it never becomes repetitive.

The proper organization of our workforce into efficient teams has helped us micro manage large areas of production. Teams are comprised of dedicated workers who implement our systems effectively and who have a clear understanding of our goals. An example of one of our labor goals is to avoid working overtime hours. Yet at the same time, we must ensure that every detail in production is planned and executed.

Finally, the data gathering that our computer system and programs offer us is essential in the day-to-day decisions we make regarding spray, fertilizer and labor costs. The frequent review of this information helps us adjust and focus where we need to improve. It also allows us to graphically compare our previous year’s costs with our present costs. The compilation of this vital information is also a motivating factor that helps keep us focused and in a competitive mind set.

In our industry we face many challenges. These challenges are highlighted by the present economic times. Now more than ever, it is imperative to create and implement efficient systems, build competent labor teams and use technology to create a more cost-effective operation.