Some years you just get older. Other years you get older and wiser. Is this a year where our industry got a little wiser?

Of the hundreds of conversations I had at the OFA Short Course, one stuck out in my mind. Actually, I had two conversations on the same topic. The first was with Steve Larson, National Ornamentals Account Manager for BASF, and a really smart guy.

It was during one of those typical hectic OFA lunches across the street from the convention center, when you sigh with pleasure at finally being able to relax for a few minutes. As we chatted, I asked Steve’s opinion of spring. Steve looked at me thoughtfully and said, “You know, Chris, in hindsight, we all got very focused on our businesses.”

I asked him what he meant by that. He explained that, because there was so much concern about the economy, growers seemed to know they couldn’t afford to keep running their businesses in the same casual fashion as they had in previous years. They had to crunch the numbers, plan production carefully and conservatively to avoid shrink, and stay on top of it all throughout the system. Because of that, he says, he thinks businesses did a very good job at business this spring.

I thought about that for the rest of the show. Could something good have come out of the stress that everyone felt from last fall onward? Seems likely. After all, most of you got into the business because you love flowers and plants, not because you love business. Business is a necessary evil. I mean, I love writing and editing … but without somebody running the business side of Ball Publishing, I’d soon be out of a job.

Later on at OFA I had a second, similar conversation on the same topic. Unfortunately, I can’t recall with whom I had it. A wholesale distributor of some form, I suspect, because the subject was collections.

I mentioned to him that, at the beginning of the year, a big worry many businesses had was receivables. Growers told me they were seeing good, long-time customers asking for extended credit terms or being slower to pay their bills, and they wondered whether or not they should accept the business for the spring.
Would they get paid? The worry was so widespread, we produced a GrowerTalks cover story on the topic for the March issue.

In response, this person told me that, amazingly, his company’s receivables were in the best shape they’d been in in years! He attributed the phenomenon to what Steve had mentioned earlier—that growers ran tighter ships, with less waste, and made sure they got their bills taken care of in a timely fashion.

Curious, I’ve since asked several businesses about their receivables situation. Admittedly, none had quite the success to report as the fellow who’d brought it up initially, but all were pleasantly surprised that their receivables were on par with previous years, or even slightly better, or at least close enough so that collection is not a concern.

Looking back, this season has been quite the learning opportunity. You learned what you and your staff are made of when it comes to running lean while being creative. Maybe a few employees rose to the top in your mind. Maybe a few proved to be baggage rather than asset.

Maybe you learned that you actually can raise prices without customers complaining … or that you can’t raise prices if you don’t raise quality, too.

Maybe you learned that sometimes less is more, and that running out of plants is better than dumping excess speculation—Bill Swanekamp (page 78) grew less product and is thankful for it, due to the miserable weather his region experienced.

In the end, we survived the first spring of the recession. But who knows how many more are ahead of us? My advice is, don’t ever forget the fear you felt going into this season. Instead, use that knot in your gut to keep yourself focused on the coming season, and every season to come. Your business will be all the stronger for it.