

# GROWERTALKS

## Cover Story

5/15/2010

## The IGC's Cheerleader

*Chris Beytes*

Show business is tough ... and not just in Hollywood. Which makes it all the more amazing that one of our industry's youngest shows, the Independent Garden Center (IGC) Show, has grown way beyond the pundits' expectations in its short three-year history. Since its launch in 2007 with 4,938 attendees and 289 exhibitors covering 54,000 sq. ft. of space, it had expanded to more than 6,000 attendees and 500-plus booths covering nearly double the space. The 2010 event will feature 532 exhibitors and who-knows-how-many attendees.

Nearly any event can have positive growth in the early years, but the IGC Show seems to have struck a harmonious chord with the industry. Credit the vision of show founder Jeff Morey of Brantwood Publications of Clearwater, Florida. Jeff is a bold, brash, vocal, unabashed supporter of independent garden centers. He makes no bones about his love for the IGC category—and his disdain for anyone who would question the cause of his loyalty.

What prompted Jeff—against all advice and reason—to launch “yet another” trade show? Green Profit sat down with him recently to find out.

**Green Profit: Jeff, where does your almost obsessive passion for IGCs come from?**

**Jeff Morey:** I grew up in the Midwest, and I think my first garden center experience was probably in the mid '60s, at Stein's up in Milwaukee. I just thought going to the garden center on Saturday morning with my dad was one of the coolest things ever. It turned me on right from the get-go.

**GP: Your dad (the late Dick Morey) was a big-time gardener, right—he even worked for Organic Gardening before launching his own publishing firm?**

**JM:** My dad was a passionate gardener. So I think to some degree I was sort of born or raised with that appreciation for the cool experience of going into a garden center. Being a child of the '70s—I graduated high school in '76—Home Depot and the other boxes were all starting about that time. So I knew the retail world before that era and I've known it since then.

**GP: But where do you see the business of IGCs? Some say it's a flat or declining category.**

**JM:** I don't think [IGCs] get enough credit for the overall American economy. It's a darn big industry! I know we can debate whose numbers we look at—I peg it at over \$100 billion a year—this is overall lawn & garden market, including the chain stores. Even conservatively, using government figures—maybe \$50 to \$60 billion.

And independents have, in rough numbers, half of that. So we're talking anywhere from a \$30 to \$50 billion a year market.

**GP: You really think IGCs and chains split the market 50-50? Some experts feel chains have 60% or more of the market.**

**JM:** We do our own market share studies ... we see the independent sector growing. I mean, the blood bath at the chains? If anything, they've been declining. The only thing that kept those guys growing their percentage of the pie has been all the massive store expansion, where they were just building store after store after store. That's slowed down over the last couple of years.

And frankly, I'm a firm believer—and we do have IGC research to prove it—that the future gardeners, Gen-Y in particular, they don't necessarily dig going to a big box store for gardening. They like the experience of going to a garden center. They like bringing their kids to a garden center.

**GP: You can't deny that the big boxes have taken sales from IGCs.**

**JM:** I do think it's regrettable that, as an industry, we let the boxes grow as wildly as they did in their early years. I mean, they ate our lunch. And they grabbed a remarkable amount of market share in a short amount of time. Frankly, I think many of the garden centers were asleep at the wheel 20 years ago.

**GP: The chains gave them a wake-up call.**

**JM:** (Laughs) More like a bomb going off in your living room! It was a wake-up call, and I think they're awake now. I think the quality of merchandise, the quality of product, the quality of display, is rapidly improving. That's aiding in the growth. So I think independents can reasonably count on at least keeping 50% of the marketplace, if not growing.

**GP: Are you anti chain?**

**JM:** I think they damage the industry to a large degree. Yeah, they push a lot of numbers. So some growers probably really like them. But ... if the consumer has a disastrous gardening experience, or not as full of a gardening experience as they should have, that hurts our industry. And from that point of view, I am anti chain.

There are two sides of the fence in this industry, big boxes and independents. And I try to look at it objectively on both sides. I would have a hard time getting enthused about the future of the big boxes if I worked on that side or had a show focused towards them. They've got such a long way to go, and they're making so many mistakes ...

They can do the fancy advertising, that's great, fine. They can do decent print advertising. And they can talk big. But when push comes to shove, they don't deliver.

**GP: Besides the wake-up call, chains have forced IGC owners to become better business people.**

**JM:** That's very true. You've got to be a professional—a professional marketer. So in that regards, I guess looking at it glass-half-full—and I'm the eternal optimist—to some degree maybe boxes have ultimately been good for the independent sector. The ones that have survived have improved.

**GP: We all know there are too many trade shows. So why did you launch one?**

**JM:** Yeah, yeah. I heard that from Day One. “Jeff, there are too many shows. We don’t need another show.” Quite frankly, I think I had the perfect response to that. I said, “Yes, you’re absolutely right. There ARE too many shows. There just aren’t enough RIGHT shows—shows that are focused correctly.”

If you look at the shows that existed before the IGC Show, there never was really a show specifically aimed at the independent garden center. Most trade shows, whether they be done by state organizations or even outside, private-sector trade show developers, they always took a shotgun approach. “We’ll have growers and landscapers and re-wholesalers and distributors and reps ... and retailers, by the way.” We saw an opportunity. There was a void. There really was no show specifically for garden centers. I had that dream of doing a show for a long time.

**GP: What’s made the show successful?**

**JM:** Not to get corny, but Cheryl and I really give credit to God for this. I mean, we feel very blessed that we’ve been able to bring so many diverse parts of the industry together. We were able to bring in the anchor exhibitors like Scotts, Monrovia, Bailey Nurseries, Bayer, Bonide—all major, key independent brands. We were able to bring in many of the associations. Garden Centers of America has been a strong supporter from Day One.

What we’re excited about, from an industry point of view, is that the independent sector has come together in Chicago at the IGC Show. Our biggest problem now is that we’ve outgrown Navy Pier. But we’re also big believers that bigger isn’t better. Everybody digs Navy Pier. It’s a great time to be in Chicago, in August. Navy Pier has a nice ambiance, a community feel. To go to a bigger hall is not necessarily the right thing to do.

**GP: I’ve heard you’re considering a West Coast version?**

**JM:** We did seriously look at doing a second show, an IGC West. I invested a fair amount of time looking at sites. I actually toured and priced out the Long Beach Convention Center, which is a nice facility. But you know, right now that’s on hold because of the economic situation on the West Coast. It’s particularly bad out there, worse than any place else that I’ve seen ... . We’ve also looked at Dallas and we’re considering Orlando. All of these would be a January/February timeframe, so we’d do two IGC Shows a year. But hey, we may always be a one-show organization. Half of our great supporters, whether they be retailers or exhibitors, say, “Jeff, don’t screw up a good thing.” A lot of people like the fact that it’s just one place, one time. It may just be that we expand the days in Chicago—we might go to a Tuesday through Friday format. Everything in due time.

**GP: You’ve had 30% growth every year.**

**JM:** Which is unbelievable. Obviously, just by sheer numbers, can we continue at that rate? I’d be thrilled if we did. If we don’t ... I’m not trying to brag, but just factually, there’s no other event in the world that brings together as many garden center folks and garden center vendors all in one place at one time.

**GP: But we both know that all tradeshow have life spans. They start out hot, then taper off.**

**JM:** Yeah, but all of the other ones are run by committees and by associations, generally speaking. Or by very large multinational corporations. We don’t fit either of those headings.

**GP: No, you’re a for-profit publisher. Which could be a drawback.**

**JM:** I think it adds some reality, in that we know we have to deliver a product to both the attendee—the retailer—and the exhibitor. What's the old analogy ... of course, it's a bad one ... what's the old Eastern Airlines motto?—"We're only as good as our last flight"—we're only as good as our last show. Now, I hope I don't go the route of Eastern Airlines!

But seriously, we're always striving for constant improvement. I have a wonderful show manager (Carl Pugh) and a wonderful business partner who also happens to be my wife and partner in life, Cheryl. Believe me, they keep me in line. We have a very strong system of checks and balances ... our intent is not to screw this up. Our intent is to continue doing and improving what has proven to be successful.

**GP: Some of your exhibitors are not IGC exclusive. Isn't that a conflict?**

**JM:** I don't think there's an issue there. Ideally, would all vendors be like Monrovia, where they sell 100% to independents? But in the real world, not all brands do that. Now, at our show, they do like it because it gives them an opportunity to show their independent-exclusive lines and special programs for the independent ... . Many brands do sell both channels, that's just a reality. If we sectorized our show off to only have vendors that sold only 100% to the independent channel, let's face it, it would be a pretty small show.

**GP: How do you keep the I in the IGC Show, since they're so much crossover?**

**JM:** We are what's technically called a juried show. We have denied entry to certain firms (exhibitors) that we feel are either inappropriate because they're something that's not sold in garden centers, or it's off topic. I mean, a lot of these regional shows will exhibit Ginsu knives and La-Z-Boy chairs. That's just not for us. So there is a great deal of review and thought that goes into the selection of exhibitors. Because of our space problems at Navy Pier, we do have a very long waiting list. Which gives us, quite frankly, the luxury of being very selective of who we put into the show. We have over 400 firms waiting to get in, so ...

**GP: What about controlling attendees to keep it IGC-only?**

**JM:** We do not allow big box attendees. If there's any attempt to register visibly as Home Depot, Lowes, WalMart—anything that smacks of the big boxes—we will politely say sorry, glad you are interested, but this is not your show. This show is strictly for independent garden centers and the peripheral industries that support that sector.

**GP: Why all the money on rock bands? What's it cost to bring in a band like America or Charlie Daniels?**

**JM:** We're spending well in excess of \$100,000 for that one evening of entertainment. Why do we do that? Because, one, I think this industry needs a party. We need to come together and have a good time. There's nothing wrong with that, you know. And two, I think it's put us on the map ... when I started this, I said look, if we were going to do this, we're going to do it big. We want this show to have a national presence, and make it a big-time event.

**GP: So where do you take it from here? Right now the world is talking about social media and webinars, not old-fashioned trade shows.**

**JM:** Well, I don't know. Trade shows have been around since Biblical times, in terms of the old-time bazaar or marketplace where all the merchants would come into one place, and I don't think that's going to change. There is still the face-to-face communication, the networking, the touching and feeling and seeing the new

product, the feeling of getting to know one another, whether it be vendors or your fellow retailer ... Frankly, I just don't think that can be replaced.

Our goal is to keep the IGC Show vibrant and relative. I can tell you we work on it 365 days a year. And that's not crap, I really do. And this is in addition to all my publishing duties. This is a passion ... you know, if it does fail, it sure isn't going to be because of lack of interest or letting it go to my head or anything like that. **GP**