GROWERTALKS

6/15/2010

Then and Now

Jennifer Zurko

Three industry professionals got the chance to sit back and ponder the topic of "how time flies" during *GrowerTalks'* visit to the Long island area.

While visiting Norman Keil Greenhouses in St. James, New York, Norman, Sr. showed us a photo of himself and his brother Otto (owner of Otto Keil Greenhouses in Mattituck) and long-time Ball Seed sales rep Jerry Mahoney. The photo was taken in 1988 by Vic Ball during one of his East Coast trips.

None of the gentlemen in the picture exactly remembered when it was taken (22 years is a long time), but they do recall how different the industry was compared with today.

"It was pretty rosy back then," says Norman. "Everyone was building and businesses were expanding. Those were great years."

Jerry concurred. "In the '70s and '80s, the sky was the limit. You could sell as much as you grew."

Otto says that the increase in competition and hard economic times have really changed the face of the growing industry. There are a lot more growers now, but less room in the marketplace, he explains. Plus, the price of plants hasn't kept up with the rest of the world—food that was cheap in 1988 is more than double the price now, while the price of bedding plants has remained the same.

"Flowers haven't gone up," Jerry agreed. "Flowers are priced the same or less than they were 20 years ago, so in order to make money today, you have to be extremely efficient and you need to understand the market and the consumer. And you have to adjust quickly."

Another change is that Norman and Otto are now working alongside their sons, allowing room for the younger generation to lead the business. Now when Jerry calls on them, the younger Keils are making the buying and ordering decisions.

And all three agreed that it's the next generation that's helping to keep their businesses going.

"If it weren't for my kids, I wouldn't be in business. I would have quit," Otto says. "I'm 73. I wouldn't be able to do this forever." **GT**