

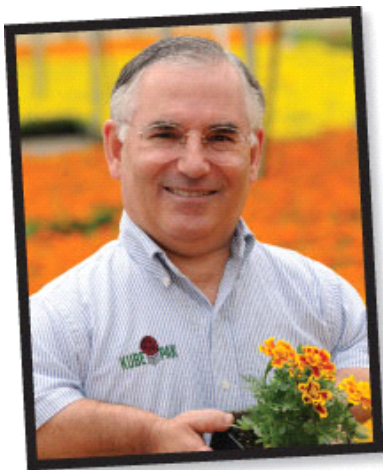
# GROWERTALKS

## Growers Talk Business

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### Rite of Passage

*Bill Swanekamp*



**BILL SWANEKAMP**

Every culture has different tests or challenges that one has to successfully complete before they're recognized as an adult. In this country, when one passes their 18th birthday they're considered an adult in the eyes of the law. There are other ceremonies associated with rites of passage, such as graduation from high school or college, where you even receive a diploma. Only after many years of study and successful testing does one receive this diploma. It's never easy to move on to the next level, but it's a goal we all try to achieve.

The spring of 2011 was like a symbolic rite of passage. For the past 48 years, I've been involved in the horticulture business and have seen many years come and go. I remember the years when my father and uncle shipped their spring bedding plant crop through torrential rainstorms and mud up to their knees. Oh, you might have forgotten that back then we didn't assemble our orders for shipping indoors, but outside in all the raw elements. That was a rite of passage; if you could endure that you were fit to be a grower.

This year we had to wrestle with a winter that would not go away and a spring that could not make up its mind to arrive. On top of that, the rain just kept coming day after day. By the end of April, we were 13.5% behind last year and the weather was miserable. It took all of our growing expertise to keep the crops from getting too tall. Our best friends were named Bonzi, B-9, Cycocel and Sumagic. In addition, because the April crop hadn't shipped on time, we had no place to put the May plantings. As a result, the plugs waited in their trays like airplanes queued up on a runway. There was just no room for them to fly.

But as you know, time doesn't stop just because we want it to, nor does it speed up to make it convenient for us. We had to bide our time and wait for the heavens to clear. Just when we thought relief wouldn't come, the clouds parted and out came the beautiful sun—10 days of sun! Now the challenge changed.

Our previous test involved our patience; now our stamina would be tested. For the next 30 days, we would be called upon to work 12 hours a day, six days a week. The demand for product was so great that we taxed every feature of our facility. The trucking department, the shipping department, the office staff and even my

brain were screaming for some relief, but none was to be found.

The train had left the station and was running at full steam; nothing was going to stop it until it ran out of fuel. One way you know that things were rolling was how impatient our customers were. Every delay annoyed them and nothing we did was enough. Tempers flared at times and unkind words were spoken. But by the end of May we broke every sales record for that month from the previous 48 years.

Now I sit at my desk and keep asking myself the same question and maybe you're asking yourself the same question: When will it get any easier? After almost 50 years of being in horticulture, I thought by now things would be easier, but they seem to be harder. I cannot even imagine what has happened to our fellow growers who live within the spillway of the Mississippi river or those whose greenhouses or nurseries are in tornado alley. Our prayers go out to you.

But if this spring was like a rite of passage, the burning question I have is this: When do I get my diploma? Yes, I want to graduate and stop being tested year after year. Someone once told me that it's not really hard to be a farmer, all you have to learn are 50 lessons. The problem is that you only learn one lesson a year. Well, by my calculation, I only have two lessons left and I will get my diploma and complete the rite of passage. Let's hope things get easier for all of us. **GT**

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