

# GROWERTALKS

## GT in Brief

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## Color Spot Founder Dies

*Chris Beytes*

Michael Vukelich Jr., founder, Chairman and CEO of Color Spot Nurseries in California, passed away August 26 after a 10-month battle with brain cancer. He was 61.

His close friend and long-time business partner at Color Spot, Jerry Halamuda, sent a note with the sad news.

“Mike Jr. was not only a great nurseryman who loved the industry, he was a passionate businessman. For 30 years he and I got to travel the world, building our beautiful company. It is impossible to share the magnitude of the loss of my dearest friend and partner to the Halamuda family.”



I'd met Michael a few times, but only interviewed him formally once, for the September 1996 issue, right after he regained control of the family business, brought in outside investors, and planned to go big. It was an audacious move at the time, and the headline of my piece was “Color Spot Nurseries: Is This Bedding's Future?” A few outside investors had had a go at horticulture, most notably Weyerhaeuser, but without success. But Michael, who'd partnered with Heller Investment, seemed confident of his ability to grow Color Spot to a size never before seen in horticulture, and he had long experience to back him up.

How long? Michael first appeared in *GrowerTalks* way back in 1973 when he was 23 years old, representing his dad, Michael Sr., and M.V. Nurseries of Richmond, California. Wearing stylish sunglasses and looking every bit the California beach boy. Michael was photographed by Vic Ball for a story about M.V. and their revolutionary marketing scheme.

Vic wrote that M.V. was a “very large” operation (400,000 sq. ft.—less than 10 acres) plus lots of saran, and they specialized in 3-in. and 4-in. annuals (this when most growers were probably doing 1206 flats). They sold 12 million pots in 1972, doing 80% of their business with the chains of the day: K-Mart, Pay Less, Handi-Market, Sears and Woolworths. But what was really revolutionary was that in the early '70s they were already providing levels of in-store service and guaranteed sales that wouldn't be widespread for another 25 years. Mike explained their system: Twice a week a driver would visit the stores, clean up the displays, water, restock (“What we think will sell for them,” he told Vic) on custom display racks that they built and supplied to

the store. Talk about ahead of their time!

When I interviewed Michael in 1996, his audacious dreams for Color Spot weren't taken lightly by competitors. I got at least one angry phone call after that piece (the first of many in my career, I'm oddly proud to say). And yet my headline turned out to be prophetic. Color Spot was just the first of many large, multi-location growers, and in-store service has become the norm. Michael saw it coming. He told me, "Why resist change? What makes you successful today won't make you successful tomorrow. We want to be out in front of the curve—we want to control our destiny by changing faster than anyone else."

Michael was laid to rest on Tuesday, September 6, preceding a Catholic mass at St. Monica's Catholic Church in Moraga, California. **GT**