GROWERTALKS

Features

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The Right Direction

Edited Jennifer Zurko

“You have brains in your head.
You have feet in your shoes.
You can steer yourself
any direction you choose.
You’re on your own. And you know what you know.
And YOU are the guy who’ll decide where to go.”
—From “Oh, The Places You’ll Go” by Dr. Seuss

If you’re part of Generation X or Y, most likely the brilliant Dr. Seuss was part of your bedtime reading list. If not, then you read them to your X or Y child who’s currently carving a path for themselves in the world (hopefully, it’s the right path).

Oh, and those terms “Gen X and Y” that makes some Baby Boomers’ skin crawl? Do they deserve the stigmas placed on them by the media (not this particular publication, of course)? Are Xers really slackers? Do Ys really not care about anything besides their smartphones and how many Twitter followers they have?

When you read the essays from our Red Fox/Young Grower Award finalists, you’ll feel those labels are unfair. These driven, passionate young men discuss why they chose the growing path and have absolutely no regrets in doing so. Whether they grew up in the business or fell in love with horticulture by another means, they knew the places they were going were the right ones.

We asked our three finalists to tell us why they’re excited about our industry … and to try and get you fired up, too.

Josh Bergmann said he enjoys the “human element” of our industry and that he gets to work with so many different people from various backgrounds and with unique personalities. He grows plants for a myriad of organizations in his community—from local churches to even the county jail!

Isaac Brantingham loves that, despite the strong competition in the marketplace, he can call up his grower

colleagues and ask them for advice. The ability to share thoughts on discovering new ways of growing and how to market our products is something you just can't get in any other industry.

Nick Smith grows for a not-for-profit operation that provides horticultural training and employment for people with developmental disabilities, and now he's nurturing his love for growing to his young son. Like with his son Riley, who's seeing the plants and seeds in the family garden with first-time wonder, Nick keeps that attitude in his daily tasks at the greenhouse.

Dr. Seuss may have been thinking of these three young men when he wrote, "Kid, you'll move mountains!"

Our panel of judges will choose the 2013 Red Fox/Young Grower Award winner based on their nomination applications, their essays and a telephone interview. We'd like to thank our esteemed judges for their time and support of this award. The judges are:

> ***Anna Ball***
> *President & CEO*
> *Ball Horticultural Company*
> *West Chicago, Illinois*
>
> ***Dr. P. Allen Hammer***
> *Product Development and Support for Dümmen USA and Professor Emeritus at Purdue University*
>
> ***Mike McCabe***
> *Owner of McCabe's Greenhouse & Floral in Lawrenceburg, Indiana, and current OFA President*
>
> ***Matt Altman***
> *2012 Young Grower Award Winner and COO of Altman Plants in Vista, California*

All three finalists will be our guests at OFA Short Course in July and the winner will be announced at the Unplugged event at the Park Street Cantina at 8:00 p.m. on Monday, July 15. The winner will be featured in the September issue of *GrowerTalks*.

We'd like to thank our award sponsors for their support: Red Fox and OFA

Question: Give three reasons you're excited about our industry and why GrowerTalks' readers should be excited about it, too.



Josh Bergmann

Age: 34
Title: Owner/Operator
Operation: Season's Harvest Greenhouse
Menomonie, Wisconsin

To begin with, our industry is timeless and fundamental to life. Rain or shine, for richer or poorer, we will be forever relevant. That may not sound too exciting, but in an unsettled local/global economy, it's exciting to know that our jobs will always be needed. However, we can and will need to continually evolve with the times and the changing economic environment in which we conduct our business.

I remember hearing stories from my late father about the changes that my grandparents and my great grandparents needed to make as growers to keep the business going. At the time, they were both dairy and vegetable "truck" farmers. They would bring milk and vegetables to both homes and farmers' markets. They worked hard through droughts and the Depression, but as the Depression years receded and people had more money, the crops they grew slowly shifted from vegetables to include ornamental annuals. Now as a sixth generation grower, the return of this shift is here and vegetable production has risen. Ornamental sales are still great, but knowing we can evolve and that we'll remain employed is exciting.

My second reason to feel enthused about the industry is the endless challenge of merging new technology to age-old basics. We've gone from the times when humans both enjoyed and suffered the consequences of their reliance on Mother Nature for their existence. They scratched holes in the earth with their bare hands to plant seeds and prayed for a productive crop. Today, a person hits a button that engages a dibbler so that a drum seeder can plant a 512 hybrid, disease-resistant seed into a common element airflow plug tray in two seconds. The unparalleled uniformity ensures that the auto-
transplanter will not miss a single plug. Albeit in a controlled greenhouse environment—where the temp gets too high, the roof opens, and when too cool, the floor begins to radiate heat. Then when the sun goes down, the energy curtain closes and the grow lights come on. Overhead booms provide just the right amount of moisture in one pass, and on a different pass, the calculated spray nozzles will assure even coverage of a quality pesticide. Wow, we've come a long way!

You wouldn't think that life could get any better for a grower, but I bet it can and I bet it will. In a demanding marketplace, we have to keep up on the latest techniques. We should subscribe to all industry publications, go to conventions, pack trials, expos and garden tours near and far. I think it's important to find and learn new ways to do things and even re-learn old ways that have gone by the wayside. I feel it's important to engage ourselves with this challenge and to expose ourselves to changes that are here today and the ones coming down the pipe. Information equals success and the information is there for the taking.

Finally, the human element. This is what excites me the most about our industry. It vastly encompasses a lot of areas, but here's a bit of how I see it.

Regardless of age, race, gender, religious beliefs, whether one wears a cowboy hat, bandana or a backwards-facing ball cap—we have all sorts of people as colleagues, vendors and buyers.

Let me expand a little. We find ourselves growing those red geraniums that a great-grandmother discriminately seeks as great-grandpa browses the herbs and vegetables. A young father shows a hint of a smile as he observes his little girl's prolonged search for that perfect fairy-garden plant, while his wife confidently loads up the many plants where the choice wasn't so difficult.

We grow poinsettias for the people at the local Catholic Church, Easter lilies for the Lutheran church, not to mention the fall mums the scouts will use for fundraising as well. Our products grace the city streets all the way down to the front doors of the courthouse. Around the corner, to supply the local food bank, our vegetables are being cultivated by inmates at the jail garden—yes, they are people, too! These are all real experiences for me.

We engage ourselves with brokers that sell plant material from South America. We work with the welder in North America that'll improve the soil return system on the latest flat filler. All the way across the pond somewhere in Europe, people collaborate to find new efficiencies in material handling. All of these things involve many types of people.

The human element also brings us the highs and lows of people as well. We should feel privileged that we get to enjoy the highs. While some business owners deal with people at their lows, such as providing caskets, counseling or selling used cars, we bring happiness and joy to people.

These people want to be here—they want our help. They want our product. Each year I even get a few people saying, "I want your job!" All said, they willingly spend their hard-earned money with us because they want to.

Our customers know that our product and quality is not just a planter or a basket that'll beautify and bring pride to their home, but it's also an extension and an offering of ourselves. Whenever appreciation is shown for what we offer, we can also know that it's not just an item to them. It's also us as people that are appreciated. Not many other occupations can provide this satisfaction. So the next time you hear someone talking about that basket they bought last year or about how the planters they're about to buy are absolutely wonderful, remember they're also talking about *us.*



Isaac Brantingham

Age: 29
Title: Head Grower
Operation: Riverbend Nursery
Riner, Virginia

Unlike many of the people who have found themselves in this industry, I didn't grow up on a family operation or had an early introduction to it. However, from an early age, I knew that I had a love for growing, nurturing and creating things. And through the introduction of first a small windowsill greenhouse and then a backyard greenhouse—which kept me awake on cold spring nights hoping that my fragile plants would survive—I realized horticulture would be my field of study and that some aspect of the green industry would be my career.

This industry has much to offer those who'll accept the many demands it imposes. It appeals to me personally for many reasons and I can honestly say that I've never regretted my decision to earn my livelihood from a profession that's so rewarding.

Each day I have the opportunity to be a part of a team that's working towards a common goal—to produce healthy, beautiful and vibrant plants that are attractive and satisfying to our constantly changing and sometimes elusive customers. Working together, we often get things right, and although there are many challenges and obstacles we must overcome to produce plants that are competitive in today's market, we're rewarded for our hard work when we receive positive feedback from a customer after their order has been delivered. Celebrating our achievements together, knowing that everyone played a part, is an extremely rewarding aspect of my job.

When it comes to producing and marketing plants, I love the fact that there's nothing set in stone and what's working well today may or may not be the best answer for tomorrow. This industry demands creativity and forward thinking from the people that wish to be a lasting, successful part of it. If we continue to produce and market our products the same way we did just a few years ago, we will undoubtedly find our product appealing to fewer people and our market share smaller than it once was. We constantly need to be looking forward, trying to predict what the customer will be looking for in the future. There's always a new PGR, fertilizer, chemical, machine or method that we've yet to try that could potentially give us an advantage and make our product more desirable. I've always enjoyed thinking outside of the box and this industry demands it of me on a daily basis.

As we all know, things don't always go as planned, but the satisfaction of discovering something new, often after more than one failed attempt, makes the process very rewarding. The owner of Riverbend Nursery where I work has reminded me on multiple occasions that making mistakes and incurring plant losses is an inevitable part of the growing business. His point is that those things will happen when you're trying new approaches intended to improve plants and processes. Unfortunately, I've found this to be painfully true! What I love about experimenting for the purpose of improvement is the idea that we should never be satisfied with our current successes. Thankfully, our industry as a whole appears to realize that we must always be striving for a better way to create and operate. If we simply accept the status quo, we'll continue to get the same results without progress.

Despite the fierce competition for market share in our field, I'm always impressed with the openness and sharing of information that goes on between operations. This says a lot about the type of people who make up our industry and it makes me proud to be part of it. There are several growers I communicate with on a regular basis. The ability to share notes on different growing methods and/or troubleshoot issues that are plaguing us has proven to be an invaluable resource that benefits all of us as we share our combined knowledge.

We should all be excited about our industry because our products bring pleasure to people and greatly improve their quality of life. Although they're not purchased out of necessity, more and more people are coming to realize that life is beautifully enhanced by the addition of plants in their environment. We have the privilege of providing people with the tools they need to be creative and bring beauty to their homes.

Our field is constantly changing and evolving and it needs more innovative thinkers to maintain and ensure its viability in a future that's becoming more and more digital. To anyone considering this industry as a profession, I would say hold on tight and prepare to never be bored. Our future is bright and I believe that our industry will remain exciting because of you, the readers of this publication, and the many others out there like you.



Nick Smith

Age: 29
Title: Director
Operation: Greenleaf Industries
Grants Pass, Oregon

Given the task of what's exciting about our industry and why others should be excited as well seemed an easy undertaking. Being a May deadline for this article, I'm right in the middle of the excitement. I love the smell of the soil, the busy days—maybe not the sleepless, possibly frosty nights—but I can't imagine doing or being anywhere else. I'm the director of Greenleaf Industries, a horticultural training and employment program serving people with developmental disabilities, located in Grants Pass, Oregon, 60 miles north of the California border. Being responsible for both a wholesale and retail nursery, I have the opportunity to see the plant from seedling to the hands of a smiling customer, knowing, in the end, that pleasing the gardener is what's most important. The growing never gets old; it's always an evolution of new varieties and new ways to grow. The people in our industry and those who support our industry have shown me that we're limitless in our creativity and resourcefulness. We work hard and have something to show for it in all we do in horticulture.

I started today with my 6-year-old son planting tomatoes in our garden and countless box elder seeds he "discovered" around the yard. The joy he had in the seeds and the potential that they possess within them are a wonder every time. Every viable seed has the potential to become a great tree. In this case, the trees will undoubtedly be removed after our great deliberation that 10 large trees should not be growing in the middle of our raised bed. (My son Riley soon after carried a snail around by its shell for a long while and asked whether it was a boy or girl. Before I could get into how land snails' gender works, it turned its head towards him and tried to give him a "kiss," so he thought it might be a girl.) Through a child's eyes, growing had first amazed me alongside my great-grandfather and I still see it the same way. We spent hours outside—me planting tomatoes and Riley digging random holes and following bugs around. I grow millions of seeds each spring and each year it's exciting to watch them grow.

I look forward to seeing the new varieties coming out for the year and trying new tips and tricks on things I've grown for many years. No two seasons are ever completely alike. While I can help control and extend seasons for plants in greenhouses, it still has weather constraints. All variables play a part and change how things are grown: weather, customers, varieties, watering. Here in Southern Oregon, our bedding plants may see a lot of spring rain and then suddenly break into a heat wave. Growers learn to be flexible, work with what we're given, utilize the tools we have and adjust accordingly. While there's an abundant amount of information on growing specific plants, the real education is growing the crop for a few years—in both rain and sun—and

most of the time somewhere in between.

We have green roofs, green walls and upside-down tomatoes; if we can imagine it in plants, we have a way of making it a reality. I'm not shy to admit when I don't have an answer to something. I may go to others for ideas and or go to trial-and-error methods. We find solutions through informational networks at trade shows, trade magazines and online databases. Often times, other growers possess a wealth of information and share freely. These things we can carry with us, we can pass on and we develop our own style into all we do as growers.

We work hard as growers and gardeners and we see exactly what that hard work does for over a season or over many years. Never have I worked alongside such dedicated and generous people as in our industry. Sometimes you have the dreaded crop failure. You learn and you move on. Last year, I had an intermittent problem with a heater in a greenhouse on the coldest of nights releasing ethanol onto my artichokes. I lost them, but I learned from it and moved on. Sometimes, a lesson is taught and when we can see it, we can be better prepared for next time.

The other side is having too much of anything leftover. I grow more than I need in my garden and more at my work than I can sell on some varieties. I find this to be a constant with most avid gardeners and the generosity exhibited is throughout the industry. We share produce with neighbors and donate to the Plant A Row projects that provide healthy produce to food pantries. I have 4-H and example beds both at our retail and wholesale sites and the produce goes to our employees and then food pantries where we have donated over 20,000 lbs. over the last few years. The people you work with become an extended family and the work we do has immeasurable benefits for all of us and our community. As one of our D.D. employees once said, "It feels good to help those less fortunate."

We give so much of ourselves to our industry—I would never take back all of the calluses and soggy shoes. I feel excited and honored to be a grower in 2013. I love to grow and everything that comes with it. **GT**