

# GROWERTALKS

## Features

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## Interviewing Advice

*Jennifer Zurko*

“Who’s your favorite author?”

This is the question Chris Beytes always asks when interviewing a potential new editor here at Ball Publishing. To him, every writer should be a reader. This is the only way to tell if the candidate has a true passion for writing and has the skill set to craft a good story—especially if you’re writing about some of the topics that are, let’s just say, a little “dry.” (Think energy curtains. It’s very difficult to make those vital greenhouse tools exciting.)

So, to complement this month’s theme of business and human resources, we asked a bunch of owners, growers and greenhouse managers one question: What’s your best interview question or technique that you use to see if a candidate would suit your business? Here’s what they said.

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## Testing, Testing ...

**Bill Swanekamp | Kube Pak, Allentown, New Jersey**

Since the greenhouse industry tends to be near the bottom of the wage scale, the old saying “beggars can’t be choosers” applies to us. It would be nice to have someone walk in the office whose resume matches their office skills.

This seldom happens. How do you then separate the wheat from the chaff?

I find the best way to see if someone has skills even remotely close to their résumé is to give them a few tests on the computer. We have a standard Excel and Word test. In no way are these hard tests, but it’s remarkable how few people pass the tests. If we find an office candidate that can get close to passing the test, we then proceed with a one-on-one interview.

Again, the stumbling block for a lot of new hires in our industry is the long hours. If they cannot work the long hours, we stop the interview. If they pass this part, then we try to determine if they’re mentally sane. If they pass this, then we hire them.

For greenhouse workers, the standard is pretty much a question of whether or not they can handle the physical labor.

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## Walk This Way

**Dana Langhoff | Floral Plant Growers, Denmark, Wisconsin**

When we're interviewing, we tend to go through the typical interview questions about what motivated them to apply for a position with our company or what kinds of things they were commended for or challenged with at their last job. But these questions only touch the surface of the individual and can be rehearsed ahead of time. What we find that's beneficial is actually walking the interviewee through the greenhouse and explaining what we do on a day-to-day basis. This can be any position for which we're hiring. We look at facial expressions and listen to responses like, "Boy, that's a lot of walking on concrete all day." These people tend to not work out at all. We feel that just having a casual conversation with people and getting outside of the stressful and formal interview setting works well. We're able to learn about how they spend their free time and what their passions are in life. This gives us a better feel for their level of ambition and if they're a positive- or negative-minded person.

I guess the biggest benefit about continuing an interview by walking through the greenhouse is the interaction with the candidate. We've all sat in an interview and were asked if we had any questions and the normal response is, "No, I'm good." Take that same person out into the greenhouse and she will most likely ask a lot of questions along the way about how and why we do things, as she tries to get a better understanding of our operations. The important point here is to make candidates feel more relaxed and they'll open up to you. Don't worry about the extra time spent with this person. In the long run, it's time well spent in choosing the right people.

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## Fine Young Cannibal

**Chris Fifo | Swift Greenhouses, Gilman, Iowa**

My favorite question when interviewing for a grower or intern position is to show them a crop that has an issue (nutritional, disease, bugs, anything) and ask them what the problem is. Whether they know or not isn't the point. I wouldn't expect them to know. It's the thought process that I observe. Some just stand on the sidewalk and look. Others will get down and actually touch the plants and look them over.

Then there are ones like Kenny McCabe, who's now a researcher at Iowa State University. He arrived for an interview as an intern during a grower meeting. We had several pots of something that was dying and we were discussing it as a group. We asked him what was wrong. He picked up a pot and looked it over and observed the symptoms. Then pulled a few leaves off and looked them over. Then he pulled it out of the pot, looked the roots over and even smelled them. (I'm not kidding!) Then, to my surprise, he tore the rootball apart and had dirt all over the floor. He completely destroyed the plant, in front of the group, in an effort to learn something from it.

That's my favorite question. And my favorite person is one who's not afraid to cannibalize a plant to learn from it.

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## Learning From the Past

**Maria Kreidermacher | Pork & Plants, Altura, Minnesota**

Coming from a smaller community, I've had the best luck hiring people we know or can get a reference from someone we know. I've learned a few things the hard way though.

Since much of our greenhouse work is physically demanding, I've hired a few people in the past on a probationary period (from a weekend to a week), so that they can also decide if the work is for them before either of us make a commitment. This spring, I had one person that lasted a day before deciding it was too difficult.

When it comes to finding employees to work with customers in our retail [garden center], I'm looking for a friendly, helpful personality—not necessarily a chatterbox. I'll take them on a tour of the greenhouse and introduce them to other employees to see how they deal with meeting others, if they ask questions or just talk non-stop.

I'll only hire teenagers that apply for a job on their own. I've learned when parents bring their kids in to apply it doesn't work out, since the kids usually don't show any motivation in their work, either.

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## Filling the Voids

**Albert Grimm | Jeffery's Greenhouses, St. Catharine's, Ontario, Canada**

Several years ago, a friend from Europe gave me two books to read by John Strelecky, an American author. The first book was called "The Why Café" and it explains the thinking that's necessary to allow a person to build a worthwhile, fulfilling career. The second book was called "The Big Five for Live" and it explains the thinking that's necessary within the management of a company to attract the right people. I've really come to be convinced by the principles that he explains and I've lived by and worked with them for the last several years. (Last year, this author was hired by the government of Spain as a consultant for solving the severe problem they have there with youth unemployment. I thought that was rather impressive, too.)

In a nutshell, one of Strelecky's more important principles says that it's a waste of time trying to define a perfect candidate to fill the voids that you've identified in your company. Instead, we should try to find a candidate that's able to identify (by him/herself) the voids that exist in a company and then fill them perfectly. In order to do so, it's imperative that the objectives and the personal goals of the job candidate are perfectly aligned with the objectives of the company and also with the personal goals of management. If we all want to accomplish the same thing, then we can each find our perfect spot to work towards that goal—as long as the structure of the company allows us to fill the voids that we identify. The perfect candidate should be able to

find our needs and fill them. We shouldn't be required to prompt and monitor that candidate, but instead we should spend our time mentoring and training. If everything is aligned, we'll find it much easier to let go of things that we need to let go of in order to make room for the new hire to fill the voids with efficiency.

When we interview people, the focus should therefore not be on what they've done, how they present themselves or how well they play their role and sell themselves. Instead, we should let the candidates explain to us what they like about the work they expect to do with us. Why would they enjoy the work that they're applying for? Why would it be fulfilling for them? What does it take for them to get a kick out of their everyday work? We should try to get an understanding of what drives their personalities, what makes them tick, what dissatisfies them and whether the person-ality that we discover is a match to our corporate culture and our expectations from our own work. If we can find that match, then we can build teams that are synergistic and extremely effective, even if we cannot exactly predict how this efficiency will be created.

Another way of wording the same concept: Most of us hire for skill and aptitude, and then we try to change personalities. But it's much easier to hire for personality and then train to create skills and aptitude.

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## Getting Right Down to Business

**Nancy Brown | Bob's Market, Mason, West Virginia**

*(These are the questions that Nancy, who handles human resources for Bob's, always asks potential employees. And they center around the same issues all greenhouse managers face. The last one is so simple and common sense, many of us don't think to ask.—JZ)*

1. Why did you apply for a position with our company?
2. Have you ever been on a tour (with a school group, etc.) of our greenhouses or otherwise viewed what the inside of any commercial greenhouse operation looks like?
3. Can you be at work when scheduled?  
Do you have schedule restrictions?
4. Are you able to work at a job with constant physical activity (including bending/ twisting at the waist, lifting from floor level/overhead reaching, walking/standing on concrete floors for long periods, bending at the neck and shoulders, flexing of hand/fingers/wrists)?
5. Can you tolerate high heat/humidity situations?
6. Are you allergic to anything we grow or soil mixes?
7. Are you color blind?

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## Let's Talk About You

**Doug Cole | D.S. Cole Grower, Loudon, New Hampshire**

We like to get the candidate to tell us as much as possible that will give us an idea of their work ethic and how

they interact with others. We don't spend any more time than necessary telling them about us.

Some of our favorite questions are:

- Why did you leave your last job? One of the biggest mistakes a candidate can make is to bad mouth their former employers. Sometimes it becomes clear that we'll probably be the next employer on their list.
- What would your perfect job be if you could pick anything? This gives us a flavor of what the person's passion is or if they have a passion at all.
- And if I were to ask any of your former managers what aspect of your work could use improvement, what would it be?

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## **It's All in the Attitude**

**Roger McGaughey | Pioneer Gardens, Deerfield, Massachusetts**

Roger always asks: Explain what you understand by attitude and how important routine is to keep on top of your daily tasks.

It lets me know how disciplined they may or not be. Will they pay attention to detail? In our profession, you need to do things now or when the crop tells you that the time is right. You can't just put things off until another day. Keeping on top of daily tasks and following a road map also helps other team members and keeps management informed that you're on top of your job and being accountable. You can get a lot out of the answer. **GT**