

GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Business

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Embracing Change

Gary Mangum



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Change continues at Bell Nursery, and if it didn't, I'd have to question why not. We're going into our second year under new leadership. In 2013, we hired Vinny Scalese to serve as our Chief Operating Officer. Vinny, working with our leadership team, made several moves that have put our company in a solid position for growth in 2015 and beyond. Some smart shifts in responsibilities and an objective look at people's talents and strengths led to early improvements in how we continue to grow in the healthiest way for our team and our customer.

Those moves, along with a seasoned merchandising team in The Home Depot stores we serve, helped make 2014 one of the best years we've seen in some time and have us poised for growth in 2015. On balance, weather treated us well in 2014, though spring was very late coming.

The acquisition of a major perennial producer late in 2013 led to our best year ever in the perennial category and provided further geographic diversity. We look forward to another solid year with a great mix of quality product at a time when consumers are increasingly looking for the value that perennials offer. Of course, I can't say enough about the job Tom Wheeler and our growing team do year after year putting some of the best-looking annuals and perennials into the Home Depot garden centers.

Closing out 2014, we acquired Blue Ridge Growers in Culpepper, Virginia, which adds significant outdoor production space, plus 20 acres of greenhouses and amazing talent that's been associated with the operation for many years. Commitments previously made will be honored, but the majority of space will expand our production offerings and service area for our primary customer.

We continue to experiment in our growing practices and focus on the issues that affect our business now and in the future. We're working closely with AmericanHort and SAF to help with their efforts on pollinator issues and look forward to the positive things that will be coming from them this year. I continue to encourage everyone in horticulture to learn more about their Bee and Pollinator Stewardship Initiative. We've been exposed to so much information about bees over the past two years and have learned from many beekeepers that they value what horticulture provides in terms of forage as vast open spaces are increasingly

developed.

In 2014, we conducted an internal experiment where we were 100% neonic free. We've put neonics back into our toolbox for 2015 in a way that provides for continued use in rotations if needed. The more research we've seen the more we believe this is, in fact, the safest class of pesticides available. We've collected and made much of the published information available on our website—
www.bellnursery.com.

Perhaps one of the most exciting changes in 2015 here in Maryland is a change of leadership at the state level that will lead to a dramatically improved environment—not only for agriculture, but for business in general. Many Bell team members worked hard to elect Larry Hogan as governor in what has been called the biggest upset in the November elections and we look forward to good things from his administration.

Change is inevitable. How we embrace it is up to us. I'm excited about our future. **GT**

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