

# GROWERTALKS

## Cover Story

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## Focused & Fearless

*Jennifer Zurko*

*Photography by Mark Widhalm*



If life were a shopping mall, Renato Zardo wouldn't be considered a window shopper. He has a clear vision of what he wants, so he would go directly to that specific store, march straight to the item, pay for it and leave. There would be no messing about with looking at the clearance rack—that's too easy. He would go for the best and, because of how hard he works, he would deserve it.

That's one way to describe Renato's determination and drive. And I'm sure there are many other analogies I could come up with to illustrate how motivated he is as he builds his horticulture career. The focus he has for his goals is to be admired, along with an interesting backstory about a young man's journey from the southern to the northern hemisphere.

### Early to the crossroads

The middle child of three, Renato grew up in the southern part of Brazil in the city of Ponta Grossa, about a 12-hour drive from Rio de Janeiro. During his teenage years, his father's coffee company fell on hard times, so when it came time to choose a career path, Renato decided to study agronomy (food crop science) at State University of Ponta Grossa.

"I was never really into plants; I was always more into people than plants," recalled Renato. "I just applied to agronomy because my father was going through a tough time and I know that if I studied it in college he would be happy. So I just did that to make him happy."

Unfortunately, shortly after Renato was accepted to college, his father passed away. Although it was sudden, the family wasn't that surprised. As his coffee business failed, Renato and his family could see the physical and emotional toll it was taking on him.

So now, at the age of 18, Renato was at a crossroads—does he choose a different major or does he stay with agronomy?

“I couldn’t leave my mother and the only [major I applied to] was agronomy, so I said, ‘Well, let’s do it then. If I don’t like it, I can do something else later on,’” Renato said. “Once I started learning about it, I just fell in love with it, with learning about plants. It’s a unique area where you combine science and people. It brings nature back to people and I think that’s very unique.”

While at college, Renato learned of an internship program through Ohio State University where he could sign up to work at a greenhouse operation in the United States for a year. One requirement was that he had to know how to speak English, so he enrolled in an English class—which not only helped him earn a trip to the States, but is also where he met his wife Danielle, who was also working toward an internship in the U.S.

## Coming back full “Circle”

In July 2008, after passing English class, Renato left the only home he’s ever known to go to a small suburb outside of Cleveland. Green Circle Growers in Oberlin, Ohio, was one of the businesses that was part of Ohio State’s internship program and where Renato truly began his career in horticulture. During that year, he learned all he could and impressed the management so much that they offered him a permanent job. But there were two problems: Renato wanted to finish school and he missed his family back in Brazil. So, after the year of his internship was over, Renato returned to Brazil to finish his undergraduate studies and enroll in a Master’s program. Danielle also returned home to Brazil from her year in North Carolina, interning at Metrolina Greenhouses. During their internships, Renato and Danielle maintained a long-distance relationship, so it was nice to be back together again in their hometown.

But Green Circle didn’t forget about Renato.

“During the second year, I started talking to one of the managers at Green Circle again and he invited me to come back,” said Renato. “I said, ‘Okay, I’ll try it.’ But we found out there was a long process to get a work visa to come to the United States, so we went through the whole immigration process. They were asking, ‘Why do you have to hire a foreigner to do something that an American can do?’ So we had to justify why I was being hired.”

It took eight months for the immigration process to work itself out, which was perfect because it gave Renato enough time to finish his Master’s degree. He was excited, but he was reluctant to leave his family again. Plus, there was Danielle, who by now was his fiancée. She was also going back to the States, but no closer to Ohio—this time a one-month internship in Atlanta. Neither was keen on doing the long-distance thing again, especially once Danielle had to go back to Brazil.

“I told Green Circle, ‘I want to come back, but I have a fiancée. She has experience in the greenhouse and worked at Metrolina.’ So they checked with Metrolina on how she did and they called her for an interview when she was in Atlanta. She passed through the interview and they hired her as well,” said Renato.

Then he laughs and says, “It’s funny because [Green Circle owner] John Van Wingerden, every time he sees me, he says, ‘We might have hired your wife because of you; now we keep you here

because of your wife.’”

So in November 2011, Renato became a permanent member of the Green Circle team.

## Changes and challenges

Renato has worn many hats during the four years since he became a full-time employee. He started as a plug grower and after eight months, earned the IPM manager job after the previous person left. While he was also coordinating the soil and water quality lab, he earned the title of Plant Health Manager, putting him in charge of the nutrition program. They also added potted crops—of which they produce 20,000 a month—to his responsibilities a few months after that, so Renato’s numerous hats are usually worn at the same time.

“When I [first] came here, I never thought I would stay here,” he said. “I was very lucky to be at Green Circle and work under the management. They gave me a lot of opportunities and I created some of those opportunities and they gave me a chance to show them what I knew. Then I started to embrace more things. That’s how the company became interested in hiring me full time.

“I think I could always go back to Brazil and if I do, I would have a lot of background [experience]. But things went extremely well here and things keep getting better and better, so it looks like I’m going to stay awhile.”

Despite the speed at which he excelled in the company, Renato still had his struggles. The biggest one was mastering the English language, which he says is still a work in progress.

“It was hard,” he admitted. “I still have an accent, but my accent was stronger in the beginning. What was difficult in the beginning was, as soon as I came here, I came as a plug grower with two years experience in a greenhouse in Brazil. So I get here and I have expectations [of just jumping right in]. I was like, ‘I have a Master’s degree, but I’m not able to communicate as I should,’ so it was frustrating in the beginning. So I studied English as much as I could, asking people questions all of the time.”

A mistake that many Americans make (or they don’t remember from Geography class) is that Brazil is one of only four South American countries where Spanish isn’t the primary language—it’s Portuguese. And although there are similarities between both languages, Renato still had to learn Spanish in order to better communicate with many of the Hispanic workers at Green Circle, four of which report directly to him.

“I learned Spanish once I started at Green Circle because I realized that the workers, they respect you better if you just try to communicate in Spanish with them,” he said. “So I was trying and they were teaching me and correcting me and they taught me how to speak Spanish. [Portuguese and Spanish] are both a Latin medium, so that helps a lot. Even when I didn’t know any Spanish, I was able to understand, but I couldn’t communicate back. But I’m getting better.”



*Renato Zardo and his wife Danielle both work at Green Circle Growers and are from the same town of Ponta Grossa in Brazil.*

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## Family guy

If you think about it, Renato knows four different languages: Portuguese, English, Spanish and the fourth is sign language. His younger brother Danilo was born hearing-impaired and has only ever communicated through

sign language. If anything kept him from pursuing his dream of having a career in the United States, it would have been over his concern for Danilo's future.

"The hardest part for me to come to the United States was leaving my brother behind," said Renato. "He's the one that needed me the most. Because of his disability, it wasn't easy for him to communicate with people when he was a child ..."

His mother Soraia, Danilo, sister Amensis and the rest of his family are always at the forefront of Renato's mind, with being so far away from them. He and Danielle try to go back to Brazil for two-week visits every 16 months or so, but it's not often enough to keep the homesickness at bay the entire time.

"Being away from the family is very, very hard," he said. "That's something you have to get used to. Day by day is okay, but when it's Christmas, Mother's Day, their birthdays—sometimes it's like it's another day on the calendar because I'm here. So those special days are complicated to handle, but it's our decision to be here. So it's something I have to deal with.

"Being away from my grandparents is complicated. You get that weird feeling of, 'Am I going to see them again?' So it really makes you think twice. But once I'm here, I've got to live here. If I stay here with my mind on Brazil, I'm never going to enjoy where I am."

Renato was lucky enough to have his mother and Danilo come all the way from Ponta Grossa to Columbus, Ohio, during Cultivate'15, where they got to see him win the Young Grower Award at the Unplugged event. It was a very proud moment for all of them.

"When Chris [Beytes] said my name, I looked down at [Danilo] and he asked me in sign language if I had won. I just nodded my head and he got it."

## Outside of the greenhouse

And Renato is enjoying his life in the United States. He's currently working on his second Master's

degree in Plant Health Management at Ohio State and his plans include pursuing an MBA right after that. Since he and Danielle don't have any children yet, they have the time and energy to continue their educations and focus on their careers.

"When I was in college, I had a clear vision of what I wanted for my professional future and all of the successful men I saw had two things in common: they were fluent in English and they had a doctorate. So I said, 'Okay, if I want to be like those guys, those are two things I have to have.'"

But it's not all work and studying for the Zardos. He and Danielle have created a nice home life with their two dogs, lots of soccer-watching ("I'm Brazilian, so I have soccer in my blood.") and grilling traditional Brazilian barbecue, which Renato does often.

They've also done a fair bit of travel around the U.S., visiting New York and Chicago. The day I interviewed Renato for this article, he and Danielle were meeting up with friends from Brazil for an RV trip in California, starting in Los Angeles to San Francisco and ending with a few days in Las Vegas.

After a roller coaster of emotional situations and tough choices, Renato has finally earned a spot on one of life's slower-moving rides. He's fully adapted to his life in Ohio—except for maybe the winters ("I don't think I'll ever get used to it ...")—and he's as focused as ever on eventually becoming a successful CEO someday.

"That's my final goal and I will not stop until I get there," Renato said. "I will do whatever it takes. I cannot see myself doing other things that don't allow me to influence more and add more value to people's lives." GT