

GROWERTALKS

Acres & Acres

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Times Change, People Don't

Chris Beytes



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On Mother's Day, my wife and I were out visiting some local garden centers and afterwards we stopped for lunch at a restaurant near one of them. This is one of those traditional Greek-owned coffee shops so popular around Chicago that serves breakfast all day, great sandwiches and pretty much anything you might be hungry for—from spaghetti to a steak.

Being Sunday and a holiday to boot, the restaurant was pretty packed, and I noted that the crowd was mostly up in age—I'd categorize it as 55-plus (which I fit into as well, but we won't go there). I commented to Laurie that this was in distinct contradiction to what we had just seen at Pesche's Garden Center next door, where the crowd was most definitely youthful—loads of young families treating mom to some flowers.

You met one such couple in our In Brief spread photo at the front of the magazine (page 12), Scott and Kim, who were as typical as you could find. To me, they represent what the vast majority of the up-and-coming generation will look like and behave like. Contrary to what the pundits say, they didn't arrive by bicycle and they weren't wearing hoodies and headphones. They had a car and, yes, even a house.

What is it with all this analysis of the generations and their habits anyway? When did we become fixated with identifying and categorizing the quirks of young people? And why do we seem to think the next generation will be so different than the preceding one? I don't recall my parents and their friends being fixated on whether or not my generation and I would be spending our money in their stores.

Granted, "Kids these days!" is something parents have been saying for eons. You can find quotes from the ancient Greeks on the topic. Also, I'm not saying there aren't some differences that come from the major societal events that occur when you're in your formative years. My dad's generation went through The Great Depression and World War II and listened to swing and big band. My brother and sister had Vietnam and Woodstock. For me, it was the oil embargo, "conspicuous consumption" and '70s rock. Gen-X had rap, grunge and the horror of 9/11. Millennials had Iraq, the housing bust and the Great Recession. These leave a lasting imprint on the psyche.

But there are many more similarities between the generations than there are differences and those become more obvious as one ages. Have you ever found yourself sounding like your mom or dad? That's a perfect example. Do you go to bed earlier and get up earlier than when you were in college? Drive a nicer car? Find yourself appreciating classical music and the evening news? Probably yes. Gardening falls into the same category, which is why I don't despair for our industry being relevant to the 80 million Millennials coming into the market.

Let's take a look at two things the "experts" have said about Millennials.

They won't buy cars; they'll use Uber and other "sharing economy" services. Not true, says Bloomberg View and statistics from J.D. Powers. Millennials have now passed Gen-X in new car purchases, accounting for 27% of sales in 2014, up from 10% in 2010.

They won't buy homes, they'll rent apartments in walkable cities. If you saw your parents upside down in their mortgage, you'd be gun-shy to make your own purchase, too, right? Well, that sounds good in theory, but more and more surveys and statistics are showing that Millennials would love to own a home—they just can't afford it yet. That's the rub: It's harder to get a loan than it used to be. And Millennials are doing things later, like getting married—a life event that often signals home ownership time.

Most people don't start gardening until they own a home and there's every reason to believe today's younger generations will get around to it eventually. Many, like Scott and Kim, already are, and those numbers are growing every month. History has proven what my headline says, that people don't change. Most of us are doing very similar things to what our parents and grandparents did, and I haven't seen a shred of evidence that that's going to change.

Including Sunday lunch at Greek-owned coffee shops. **GT**