

# GROWERTALKS

## Acres & Acres

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### Shake It Up

*Chris Beytes*



**CHRIS BEYTES**

A change is in the air.

Look at politics. Bernie and The Donald are shaking up the establishment in Washington D.C.

Across the pond, just over half of U.K. residents voted to leave the European Union.

Closer to home, I've got writers who are stirring the pot. Last month in his GrowerTalks column, Art Parkerson made a persuasive argument why you should NOT listen to your customers, contrary to popular wisdom. (I loved his line about Einstein obviously not caring what others think, otherwise he'd have combed his hair.)

*Green Profit* columnist Amanda "Kiss My Aster" Thomsen, a new-school garden writer, has definitely stirred up the old school with her "funky, punky" blog. Her irreverence never ceases to amaze and amuse me. I was blown away when she created a garden center "Mad Lib" for one of her columns. Crazy genius!

Even my newest writer, Dr. Matthew Chappell, editor of our Nursery & Landscape Insider e-newsletter, promised in his very first issue to stir up conversation and controversy with every newsletter. He's already picked on Millennials (then praised one of them the next time). Who knows who he'll target next. Probably me!

Now, unlike some of our politicians, none of my writers have been rude. They've simply been unafraid to buck the system and swim against the tide. No longer content with the status quo, they're seeking opportunity where others are afraid to tread, and are encouraging you to do the same. I dig that.

Fifteen years ago, I recall spending time with a young Gary Mangum as he was just starting to build the behemoth that is Bell Nursery, one of the premier mass market growers in the country.

Back in the '80s and '90s, the modus operandi of the typical large chain grower was to sneak in under the radar, drop the product on the sidewalk and exit quickly, hoping nobody noticed you'd been there.

Gary, on the other hand, would actually seek and out and talk with store personnel, from regional managers down to cashiers and part-time floor help. He was communicating constantly with his buyer, sharing market intelligence, new variety and packaging ideas, and pricing ideas. Bell was a giant blip on the radar ... and it worked. Bell quickly expanded from serving a few Maryland stores to across the Eastern Seaboard. Gary achieved that by operating in a new way—a way that's become the norm today, by the way.

I write about this because I'm worried that tradition could be holding our industry back. Traditional products, traditional thinking ... even traditions in general—traditional flower-giving holidays, traditional gardening seasons, traditional geranium-and-spike container garden recipes.

My staff would think it odd for me to be the one advising you to seek out new, untraditional paths. They think I'm as old-school as they come. Jeans and t-shirts. Classic rock. The same ham and cheese lunch for years.

But in reality, I love to shake things up. I embrace change. I'm always working with my editors and designers to tweak the magazine with new authors, new columns and new page designs. If it ain't broke ... break it! I can't leave well enough alone.

And neither should you.

When I think of the growing, expanding businesses I know, they have one thing in common: ownership that's constantly seeking new, untested ideas, something nobody else has thought to do, at least in connection with a flower business.

And that's key: A few years ago, I wrote a story about Mitchell & Maxwell Boutique Seed Purveyors, run by a pair of 20-year-olds who were going to show the industry a whole new way to do business. Boy, the responses I got! Finally, we'd know which direction to go! Folks were so disappointed to find out it was an April Fool's joke.

But you see, Mitchell & Maxwell didn't have the answer. To follow someone else's path is to stay one step behind. You need to break new ground, travel uncharted territory. Borrow inspiration from other markets and adapt it to your own business. Get it going well ... and then shake it up again.

And above all else, aim high, fail big and often, and don't worry about what anyone else thinks.

But do comb your hair. **GT**