

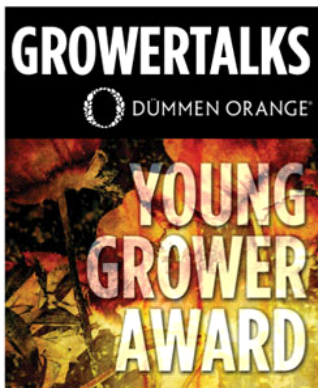
# GROWERTALKS

## Features

5/31/2017

## Motivating the Next Growers

*Jennifer Zurko*



The shoe is now on the other foot. The current crop of young horticulturists now find themselves in the mentor's seat.

With the stigma that comes with being a Millennial (they don't want to work hard, they're fickle, easily distracted, etc.) now starting to slowly peel off as they get older and more experienced in the Real World, there's more room for the next group of young hopefuls to come in. Enter Generation Z, also stuck with the reputation of being difficult people, but whose eyes and thumbs have been glued to a smartphone since birth.

It's nothing new, this hand-wringing about the "next generation." (I was once a "slacker" Gen Xer that would never amount to anything, remember?) So is the process to motivate young people that much different from the way it was before? Yes and no. Yes, because technology is different. But no, because many of the same things that motivate them—the ability to be autonomous, receiving clear direction, positive recognition for a job well done, being a valued member of a team—motivate all of us.

We asked our three finalists about how they would attract potential employees from Generation Z and inspire them to love this industry as much as they do—because, eventually, they will be these newbies' bosses.

**Adam Heimos** said helping them address their fears of failure and giving them opportunities to prove themselves with problem-solving situations will provide an ideal environment for them to be successful. And even getting to the roots of why horticulture is awesome—the touchy-feely aspects of growing plants—is an attractive proposition.

**Tiffany Watson's** mantra is "Give people a chance." She's a prime example of that since her current employer saw something in her when she was just a freshman in college and offered her a job. Young horticulturists just starting out get frustrated when there are only opportunities for people with work experience—you should be willing to train the newest members of the industry.

As a grower for a public garden, **Jill Mullaney** has already been managing younger people and she's learned that sharing information, making expectations known up front and allowing room for small successes

are simple actions that go a long way to recruiting lifelong hort professionals.

## Essay Question: We'll soon have Generation Z coming into the workplace and you'll be their boss. How will you attract them, motivate them and turn them into life-long horticulturists like yourself?



### Adam Heimos

**Age:** 28

**Title:** Grower & Trial Manager

**Operation:** Millstadt Young Plants/NG Heimos Greenhouses  
Millstadt, Illinois

I love the response I get when I ask colleagues and peers about Generation Z—the most overly exaggerated eye-roll followed with a “they are helpless!”

It's no surprise Gen Z would be reluctant to join the workforce when they're met with contempt and hostility from the start. I'm excited for Generation Z to enter the workforce—they may not bring a Baby Boomer's hard-work ethics or Generation X's resourcefulness, but they do have something both of these prior generations had, but didn't freely express, which is creative problem solving.

Generation Z was born into the world with cell phones and other perpetuating technological advances. They can take these machines apart and reassemble it so quickly we're left puzzled and angry because we didn't get a chance to see the process. If we can harness this creativity by educating Generation Z early in their professional careers or even sooner, through education, we can lift the contempt or reluctant attitudes towards this rising generation.

I was drawn to the industry because of the plants, and more specifically, the chemistry. Plant Physiology was one of my favorite classes in college; learning how the plant pulls in nutrients and then distributes them via the xylem and phloem was fascinating.

Photons leave the sun and hit the leaf's cuticle, which disperses the light through mesophylls where the chloroplasts capture the light that drives carbon dioxide and water through two photosystems, which turns carbon into glucose. It's a very technical biological process that we still don't fully understand. Generation Z could be the ones to understand this and produce more efficient solar panels to help reduce our carbon foot print, but it all starts with interest in photosynthesis.

One thing I hear from my friends and family is, “I kill things” or “I have a black thumb.” This leaves them uneasy and unwilling to try again. I feel Generations Y and Z are afraid to fail. Of course, this is a natural fear to have, but you can't let fear run your life. There's a saying: “Limits only exist in our minds.” If we fear our own limits, how will we continue to pursue greater achievements?

Growing is a trade skill. You can go to school and learn symptoms and causes to diseases or nutrient deficiencies. Growing is something we do. It's the perfect balance of cause and effect. I watered the plant when occurrence A happened and the effect was occurrence B—how do I fix this? This skill requires practice and experience of problem solving. Generation Z does like solving problems; maybe that's the characteristic we should focus on. If you give me a problem to fix and I fix it, the feeling of accomplishment is a greater sense of purpose and satisfaction.

Problem solving will help them develop creativity and become invested in the industry at the same time. Let me give you an example: one of the challenges our company faced in 2016 was growing in a peat and coir mix. Our plants were undesirable, having little root structure and stunted leaf expansion. Rupert, another grower at N.G. Heimos Greenhouse, and I took it upon ourselves to fix this. We couldn't go through another growing season with this problem, so we reinvented the wheel. We started by testing the properties of our media components (peat and coir), including physical properties and nutrient analysis. The results showed coir being high in chlorides. We needed to remove the chlorides, so we began thoroughly washing the coir.

Wetting the coir more not only released the excess chlorides, but it also made the coir “fluffier”— another property that our mechanized coir processor couldn't achieve. This years' media for spring has drastically improved. We've treated less for Pythium and other common soil-borne pathogens. Our roots are white, healthy and abundant. This is the sort of problem solving we need to ask of Generation Z. Steer them into asking questions and solving problems; it will keep them invested and wanting to pursue answers.

I love talking about the plants. Visiting botanical gardens or community gardens, or even something as informal as visiting a neighbor's house, can help guide them to a beautiful container or landscape bed. Generation Z can become more acquainted with the industry by simple communication techniques. The botanical garden here in St. Louis, Missouri, has a children's garden that allows them to get up close and personal with herbs, flowers, bugs, and all of the smells and sights that being outdoors has to offer. We want to perpetuate this similar feeling to others outside of the horticulture industry. This allows individuals to be able to talk with friends or neighbors and spread strategies that may have or may not worked for others.

The world isn't getting bigger, it's getting smaller. Generation Z can harness that spread of communication of a great idea. If we could get one plant to go “viral,” then we've connected with them.



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## **Jill Mullaney**

**Age:** 33

**Title:** Greenhouse Manager

**Operation:** Dallas Arboretum  
Dallas, Texas

All throughout my professional life, I've always felt I was stuck in the wrong generation. Perhaps it was growing up in the Midwest on a hog farm or just the way I was raised. But I never felt in tune with the generation I'm supposed to identify with due to my birth year—Millennials. Maybe because I have the mindset and drive of Generation Xers, I find it quite easy to mentor and work with younger individuals.

Whatever the case may be for me personally, the future of our industry depends on the next generation that's starting to enter the workforce and our ability to retain them. Generation Z can be a scary proposition for those of us that just don't quite understand what's going on in the minds of today's youth. (Raise your hand if the words "Snapchat" and "bae" evoke an eye roll.)

But I wholeheartedly believe that engaging the next generation all comes down to remembering what it felt like when you first started. Remember being so eager to learn and impress your boss, but afraid to fail? Or wanting to know what was going on organizationally, but always being left out of the loop? Those feelings are cross-generational.

In the botanic garden world, the door is constantly revolving with new, fresh faces straight out of college eager to make their mark on public horticulture and the broader world of horticulture. I've had the opportunity to mentor many interns and younger employees over the past decade and my number one piece of advice is to be honest. Don't sugarcoat the job just to fill the position.

I always, always make sure any potential employee understands what's expected. This industry is dirty. It's hot. (SO hot in Texas greenhouses!) It's tiring. But guess what? It's also really rewarding. It's never boring. It's a lifelong progression of knowledge and self-improvement. And on top of it all, a super-cool family of insanely intelligent people.

It's so important for the next generation to have trust in their managers and to make sure they know the high standards that are expected. Transparency and sharing information, whenever possible, triggers an ownership complex in the employee, which in turn further encourages hard work and dedication. Trust is so important and is a two-way street, because if you didn't trust the person you hired, why did you hire them in the first place?

Make sure they're invested in their daily activities. I like to personally give a small task that a person can take ownership of with little management direction. This way, my employee feels that I trust them to handle a task on their own and I get a sense of how that particular employee works. Then I can adjust my interactions or management style with an employee based on the positives and negatives of this exercise.

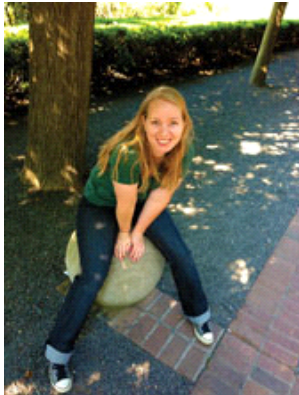
According to a Forbes article I recently read on Gen Zers, this generation has been raised on working cooperatively. I personally hated group work in school, therefore, this concept has been a little trying for me to understand and integrate at times. Getting to know your team members helps you to figure out what makes them tick. Even though things move so quickly in a greenhouse setting and it's sometimes difficult to build the team atmosphere, setting up some team-building opportunities can foster a happier work environment, which especially helps employee retention.

Many articles I've read describe how important the work/life balance is for Generation Z. Work/life balance is hard for our industry. We all know it. I've had the discussion many times with colleagues—yes, we have so much work to do, but at the end of the day, this isn't life or death. If we are a day behind on seeding a crop, nothing catastrophic will happen. It really helps to keep perspective, to keep ourselves healthy and rejuvenated. I think we can all benefit from adopting some of that mentality of Gen Z. Treating ourselves better

can only help 1) the current workforce and 2) our impending workforce. It will become quite difficult to attract future employees if they only see us ragged and run-down. Would you want to sign on for that lifestyle?

In order to turn these new employees into life-long horticulturists, I once again think the concept of forming a team comes into play. People are going to want to stay in an industry that actively practices continuing education, information sharing and personal growth. It's much harder to embark on a new career journey once you've been exposed to the many friendships and travel opportunities the horticulture field provides.

Nothing makes me prouder than seeing an amazing crop going out the greenhouse doors and then witnessing the light in a younger person's eyes as they beam with pride. I strive for that in each mentoring situation—the moment when I know that individual has been “bitten” by horticulture. In general, I try to be as patient as possible, direct in all instructions, encourage growth, all while being firm and guiding. I guess we're being trusted with being parents to the next generation of plants AND growers. What an honor!



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## **Tiffany Watson**

**Age:** 30

**Title:** Head Grower

**Operation:** Ritter Greenhouse  
Bridgeton, Missouri

This is a subject that we've been discussing at Ritter Greenhouse for some time. We're currently in the process of implementing these ideas to grow our workforce with budding talent. Our ultimate goal at Ritter's is to become a veritable training center for growers in the area, so we work very closely with the Horticulture Program at the local community college—the St. Louis Community College at Meramec to help attract local talent. As a horticulture student at Meramec myself, I have a profound urge to help fellow students by giving them the same opportunity that I was given.

I'd like to share my story about that opportunity:

I started at Ritter's three years ago as a freshman student looking to get my “foot in the door” in the industry. My original intent wasn't to get into greenhouse work—it just so happened to work out that way. I attended a student career fair in hopes of landing my first industry job, preferably in the landscape sector. After having a few disappointing conversations with potential employers who only wanted “experienced talent,” I began to grow very frustrated. That's when I met Bob Glover, the Head Grower for Ritter's at the time.

Although I had no industry work experience, Bob saw something in me and encouraged me to apply. A couple weeks later, I landed a job as a seasonal grower and Ritter's first ever Meramec student hire. I impressed them so much with my motivation and work ethic, that in less than two years' time I was promoted to my current position of Head Grower.

The moral of the story here is about giving people a chance. It inspires and motivates students to work at Ritter's because of the opportunities that are given and that's in no small part of how we attract young

employees. We love—and prefer—to hire people with little to no greenhouse work experience. I'm an example for students, as it shows that a student with no previous experience can become successful. With that said, I share everything I've learned—both through school and my work experience—with my staff. I encourage them to keep learning, since we always are!

Over a year ago, we hired my assistant, Sarah Moore, who's also a Meramec student. She's been crucial in helping to recruit, as well as train our newly hired students. By word of mouth, we've managed to become the recognized name for greenhouse work in the St. Louis area. Before long, we began to add more and more students to our staff and now I'm proud to say that we have a growing department staff comprised almost entirely of students!

To further answer the question: we attract students and young people by offering them way more than a job ... we offer them a complete experience of the greenhouse industry. We offer a job, yes, but also an education since we teach and share everything. I believe this is paramount to attracting younger generations—like Generation Z—who are expecting more and more from a job.

I love teaching my growers every aspect of our operation in an effort to gain understanding and respect for everyone's job in the company. We also cultivate a culture of sharing—if one of us finds a pest or disease issue, or if we have a special visitor at work, I want to bring my staff in to experience it. I recognize that offering value and respect to employees also helps with worker retention, which is something we've struggled with in the past.

In an effort to motivate my growers, I instill a sense of pride and quality in our work. It fills us with pride seeing our hard work result in beautiful plants that go out to be enjoyed by customers around the St. Louis area. I see it as having a hand in the beautification and enjoyment of the local area and that's a wonderful feeling! In my opinion, there's nothing more satisfying as a grower than to see your plants out in public and say "I grew those!" That's the type of mindset I encourage.

Furthermore, I motivate my growers by explaining all of the technical aspects of growing plants. My staff hears this a lot from me; I love sharing all of the "hows and whys" of what we do as growers. I don't run my department as a "do this because I said so" approach. Rather, I explain every detail of why we do what we do in order to gain an understanding of the tasks at hand.

For example, if we see iron deficiency on a petunia, I'll run through all of the cultural possibilities of why that could have happened and how we're going to correct it. That way, everyone understands the possibilities of how iron deficiency can occur, so it can be prevented in the future. This understanding of the technical aspects is twofold—it both attracts and motivates young growers because they have a better understanding of how the plants work, and as a company, our plant quality improves. It's a win-win situation! Working at a greenhouse is very technical and detail-oriented, so it's unique and attractive to people who are interested in those avenues.

In conclusion, the keys to attracting and motivating the younger generations are to give them a chance, offer a value-added work experience and to instill them with the pride of being a part of something bigger than themselves. What we do isn't just about nurturing plants; it's about nurturing people. If we're willing to invest in

educating, encouraging and nurturing the incoming generations, we'll have budding horticulturists for years to come!

Our panel of judges will choose the 2017 *GrowerTalks*/Dümmen Orange Young Grower Award winner based on their nomination applications, their essays and a telephone interview. We'd like to thank our esteemed judges for their time and support of this award. This year's judges are:

**Anna Ball**

President & CEO  
Ball Horticultural Company  
West Chicago, Illinois

**Art Parkerson**

Owner of Lancaster Farms  
Suffolk, Virginia

**Terri Bates-Cantwell**

Owner of Bates Sons & Daughters, Inc.  
Lake Placid, Florida  
Vice Chairman of the Board for AmericanHort

**Jane Stanley**

2016 Young Grower Award Winner  
Saunders Brothers  
Piney River, Virginia

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