

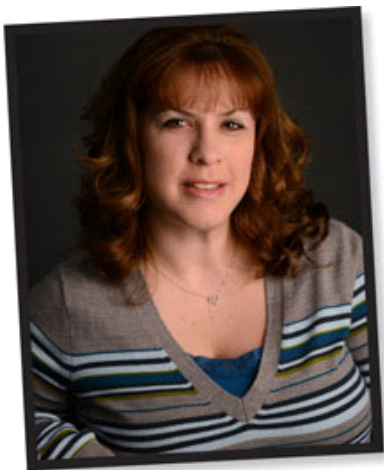
GROWERTALKS

Columns

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Worries & Wakefulness

Jennifer Zurko



JENNIFER ZURKO

One of the burning questions that I learned to ask from Chris Beytes is: “What keeps you up at night?”

When I ask a grower this, I almost always get an interesting answer. They first pause, usually chuckle or sigh or let out a deep breath, and then start telling me. This is when you get an authentic answer, from-the-heart stories and ideas for other articles. This is when we find out what’s weighing on the minds of growers.

During the last two years, I can say without a doubt that when I ask that question, the answer has always been labor.

A recent grower visit was so pleasant, and the family that owns the business so friendly and wonderful, that we found ourselves laughing and joking during my interview. As a southern grower, their spring starts early—and was even earlier this year because the weather actually cooperated, so they had to deal with some shortages, which can be a good thing.

So they had a good spring. But when I asked them about the labor situation, the conversation turned. The smiles were gone and were replaced with creased foreheads and knitted eyebrows. “Not good,” they said. And they haven’t been the only ones to tell me this recently.

True, some growers have been coasting along fine and shrug their shoulders when I ask them if they’re worried. But they’re the minority. What used to be “we’ll deal with it” a few years ago has changed to “we’re panicking” now.

This month is not the first time I’ve written about labor and immigration; it’s a topic I’m very familiar and passionate about. So I didn’t want it to be too “basic”—you guys already know about the labor issues we’re having. You live it. So instead of writing something that just talked about it, I wanted to give some solutions that you could actually try in your own businesses. Inspiration from your peers, so to speak. Turn to page 42 to read it. I hope that it gives you something to think about.

One thing you can do (and I do mention at the end of my article) is to get involved. If these polarizing political times teach you anything, it's that being informed and vocal is more important than ever. Don't just wring your hands and complain about it—do something about it. Find out who your legislators are, call their people and schedule a visit to your operation. Meet them face-to-face and talk to them. And when you do this, email or call me and let me know. We'll spread the word so that others will be inspired to do the same.

Another way you can get your voice heard is to attend industry lobbying events, too. The Society of American Florists host their Congressional Action Days every March and AmericanHort is holding Impact Washington this September. Both events have guest speakers and offer a chance for you to set appointments and meet with your representatives and senators. You can register at <http://americanhort.org/impact>.

Bert Lemkes, who I spoke with for my article and has been lobbying for immigration reform for years, told me: "We need to get action and the only way is to get more business operators to be proactive toward our legislators." **GT**