

GROWERTALKS

Acres & Acres

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Operators

Chris Beytes



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Back in October, managing editor Jen Zurko and I traveled to Miami to interview Maria Costa-Smith of Costa Farms. Jen did the interviewing while I shot photos and listened in attentively to the fascinating conversation (which you can read in the [December 2018 issue of *GrowerTalks*](#)).

The night before our meeting, Jen and I had dinner with Mike Rimland and his wife, Sandra. Along with owning Rimland's Nursery (where he specializes in anthuriums), he has a production partnership with Costa and serves as their VP of foliage R&D and "global ambassador." He's also a long-time Costa family friend. He's known Maria and her brother, José, since they were knee-high to a dracaena.

As a globetrotting horticulturist and 43-year veteran of the foliage industry, Mike is a fascinating conversationalist, with ideas and opinions on every topic imaginable. Despite being born and raised in Miami, he's often mistaken for a brash New Yorker, what with his booming voice and rapid-fire cadence. Needless to say, dinner was entertaining!

At one point, Jen, who'd not yet met Maria, asked Mike for some insights into what makes her tick, which he provided in positive and glowing terms. "Oh yeah," he concluded, "Maria is definitely an operator."

Huh? "An operator?" I interjected. "You mean like slick and smooth? That's not the Maria I know."

No, no, Mike replied, an operator is someone who knows and understands their business so thoroughly, and is so obsessively passionate about it, they're able to take it to a very high level. Of course, he didn't put it in those terms; that's me putting together about 30 minutes' worth of Mike's musings on the topic. We went on to discuss other "operators" who are some of the most respected names in the business.

"I definitely believe that the greatest nurseries in the world have the greatest operators. There's no doubt," he said.

His words have stuck with me as I've sought to define what makes someone an "operator." Wanting to delve deeper, I called Mike recently, and we spoke for almost an hour on the topic. I'd caught him off guard, so much of what follows is him thinking out loud.

First, what makes someone a true "operator" vs. just an owner?

"It comes down to one word: instinct," says Mike. And instinct only comes from years of experience in every facet of

your business. You can't just be a great grower; you have to know how to market and sell your plants, too—and vice versa. You have to have done every job around the nursery.

Next, operators have insight. “Instinct drives insights,” Mike says. “You can't have insight into your industry, your business, your people or your customers without instinct. And you can only get instinct from experience.”

I mentioned Gary Mangum of Bell Nursery, whom Mike and I both know well, as an example of someone with experience, instinct and insight. Then Mike added a fourth trait of operators that Gary brought to mind: understanding human nature.

“When you're talking to people, you have to be thinking not just about what you're saying to them, but what they're thinking about what you're saying to them,” Mike says.

That made my head swim a bit, but I eventually got it: You have to be liked and understand people. You have to want to help your employees succeed and your customers, too. That describes Gary perfectly. “And Maria, too,” Mike added.

Mike offered yet another thought based on his 43 years of experience: “You can't do it alone. You need an army in this business that loves you and respects you.”

Mike says he's known plenty of very smart business owners whose employees couldn't stand them. Conversely, he's known lovable owners whose employees had no respect for their intellect or ability. True operators are both loved and respected by their employees, their customers, their vendors ... everyone they deal with.

How do you earn that love and respect? “You have to care,” Mike answers.

“You have to care about your customer, you have to care about your employees, you have to care about your company, you have to care about your environment, you have to care about yourself. You have to have that in your make-up, that it's something you're thinking about all the time.”

Then Mike, the lovable, respected operator, said goodbye and hung up. He had to catch a plane to Japan, to gain some more experience, instinct and insight. **GT**