

GROWERTALKS

GT in Brief

2/1/2020

MANTS Turns 50

Jennifer Zurko

Photography by Larry Canner Photography



As a fourth-generation nurseryman, Carville Akehurst and several of his fellow nursery growers were looking for another, more local, way to expand their sales reach and network within the Mid-Atlantic's horticulture industry. So in 1969, he and other members of the Maryland and Virginia state landscape associations put their heads together and came up with the Mid-Atlantic Nursery Trade Show known as MANTS.

In early January, MANTS celebrated 50 years of being the first horticulture trade show on our industry's annual calendar.

As one of the original founders of the show, Carville was MANTS's first executive vice president. As the show grew and settled on a permanent home at the Baltimore Convention Center when it was built in 1981, Carville left his family nursery to focus on building his management company in the mid-1980s. At that time he was managing the Maryland Nurserymen's Association, as well as MANTS.

In 2001, Carville renamed the management company from Akehurst Management Associates to Quercus (appropriately taken from the Latin name for "oak"). Unfortunately, that same year, Carville passed unexpectedly, leaving the fate of Quercus and MANTS up in the air.

Carville's wife Nancy inherited the management company, but she told the board that she didn't want to run it full-time; that they would need to find someone to run the business. And Carville passed in August, meaning the next MANTS was only four short months away.

So Nancy asked one of their daughters, Vanessa Finney, if she could help. At the time, Vanessa was home with a newborn baby and had plans to take a year off from her regular CPA job to stay home and be a mom to her three

young children. But Vanessa agreed to help.



Pictured: MANTS 1974.

Nancy and Vanessa originally didn't intend to keep MANTS, but the 2002 show went off smoothly and they realized how well everything worked, so Quercus retained management of the show. Nancy retired in 2004 and Vanessa became executive vice president. Her husband, Kelly, joined her at that time, as well.

"It wasn't easy; it was very hard," Vanessa admitted. "We had to gain the board's trust and it took a few years for that trust to be earned. That we had the chops to manage it."

When MANTS started, they had 64 exhibitors and about 150 attendees; 50 years later, they have over 950 exhibitors and see 12,000 people in the aisles. Vanessa said they've grown little by little through the years, expanding into the 300,000 sq. ft. of convention center space, hitting capacity in the current footprint in 2004 and continue with a waiting list of about 120 companies.

She said they could try to fit in more exhibitors by contracting the size of the extra-wide aisles and eliminating all of the tables and chairs, but as you know, trade shows can be a fickle business, and they worried about trying to squeeze too much in or growing too rapidly. And it's a business-focused show, after all—they want plenty of space for people to sit down and have meetings, place orders or simply rest.

MANTS has been able to survive the ups and downs of the industry, including the Great Recession in 2008 when a lot of regional trade shows were affected and eventually closed shop. One of their key founding tenets is there's no education track at the show and that's by design, said Vanessa. Her husband Kelly, who works alongside her, likes to say that the education happens on the trade show floor. They've always wanted to keep it focused as a "business show" and it works for them.

For the last three years, SNA has piggy-backed on MANTS, holding their annual plant conference the days before the show to offer some type of education if people want it. Plus, the other grower associations around the Mid-Atlantic offer their own educational conferences a month later and MANTS has never wanted to step on their toes.

It's interesting how much MANTS has grown. It started off exclusively with a nursery focus, but now you see a more diverse offering of products, with perennials, grasses, hardgoods, and even a smattering of annuals.

"The difference is we started as a nursery show—a lot of green," said Vanessa. "We still have a lot of trees and shrubs and plant material, but we have evolved to everything that's soup to nuts—that's anything to do with horticulture production or end sale."



Pictured: Carville Akehurst, one of the original founders and first executive vice president of MANTS.

Other changes the show has seen over the years is less "ball and burlap" (more of a focus on container production and other product forms), more automation (which a lot of shows are seeing) and changing demographics (the "men's" was taken off "nursery" in the name in 1996). The show has also expanded to offer more sponsorship opportunities for exhibitors, which Kelly started when he came on board in 2004. More areas

around the convention center are available for exhibitors to promote their products and businesses.

“MANTS was always bare bones; we didn’t do anything super fancy,” said Vanessa. “We have a little bit more of that now than we used to, and it adds interest and a little more excitement to the show.”

I was honored to be invited to the 50th anniversary banquet that Vanessa and the rest of the MANTS team held to not only celebrate the success of the show, but to thank those who’ve supported them throughout the years, including “the original six” exhibitors who’ve had booths at the show from the beginning. (One of those is Lancaster Farms, owned by our friend and columnist Art Parkerson.)

The night also included a celebration of Vanessa’s father Carville, who would be 86 years old if he was still alive. Although he’s been gone for almost 20 years, you truly got the sense of the impact he made on the show and people’s lives, and how much they still miss him.

“Because of all of his connections throughout the nurserymen’s association and the trade show, people knew him. He was wise and he was someone that people really looked up to,” said Vanessa.

In the meantime, MANTS will continue to use the formula that’s made them successful, while also embracing new ideas and technology that helps them be sustainable. And, as it was 50 years ago, it will always be the first trade show to kick off a new year.

“One of the reasons that MANTS is the first week of January is because the founders wanted it to be the first show of the year to set the tone for the industry,” said Vanessa. “I still think our industry, in general, we’re people-people; we like to make face-to-face connections. That’s why I think the show will keep going. I think people in ag value those relationships.

“In order to survive, you have to have value, you have to be producing something, an incentive for people to come. And the incentive here for MANTS is you’re building or renewing those relationships, and we’re providing that platform.” **GT**