

# GROWERTALKS

## Cover Story

6/1/2020

## Optimism in the Face of a Pandemic

Jennifer Zurko

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It's been a weird year. And it's not even halfway over.

Little did you know that weather wasn't going to be your only worry this year. But with the COVID-19 pandemic,

growers and retailers have had to juggle the daunting tasks of keeping their employees and customers safe, while trying to figure out how to continue to sell their product. That's on top of the typical spring challenges of weather and labor shortages.

It's easy to dwell on the negative during a crisis—especially during one none of us has ever been through. The scariest part is that every single person in this country and on the planet is going through this for the first time. Any other life crisis has at least one other person who can relate; COVID-19, not so much.

To add to the weirdness, Cultivate is going to be a virtual show this July. It's just too risky to try and gather all of us in the Columbus Convention Center ... even if all of us were willing to risk going. Unfortunately, this means we don't get to sit down and break bread with our Young Grower and Young Retailer Finalists during a fancy dinner in Columbus. We'll be announcing the winners via a virtual form of Unplugged, which we're going to make as fun and celebratory as possible. Colleges and high schools around the country are finding creative ways to honor the class of 2020; we're going to try and do the same.

So it would have been remiss of us not to address the elephant in the room with regard to this year's essay question; we had to ask this year's finalists how they feel COVID-19 will impact their companies and communities. All three of them discussed the extreme difficulties their operations have had to face with the coronavirus, but they were also able to look at the bright side, considering the positives that will come out of this. How it'll make people appreciate gardening and horticulture even more. How it's forced them to implement new ways of doing business that will become permanent parts of their process. And how it'll make us stronger and be remembered for being the bearers of happiness in the form of plants and flowers.

We could all use a little optimism right now. And it was nice to be reminded of that by our industry's young rising stars.

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Our panel of judges will choose the 2020 GrowerTalks/Nexus Young Grower Award winner based on their nomination applications, their essays and telephone interviews. 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**

Lancaster Farms, Suffolk, Virginia

**Susie Raker-Zimmerman, Vice President**

Raker-Roberta's Young Plants, Litchfield, Michigan

Chairwoman of the Board—AmericanHort

**John Terhesh, 2019 Young Grower Award Winner**

Goodmark Nurseries, Wonder Lake, Illinois

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## Stephanie Berkhout

**Age:** 28

**Title:** Indoor Spaces Lead Grower

**Operation:** Qualitree Propagators Inc.—Rosedale, British Columbia, Canada

### Q. What do you think will be the long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on your business, your customers and your community?



It's difficult to know where to begin when tasked with writing anything about COVID-19. At the time of writing, despite the promising news in British Columbia so far, there are still many unknowns. The media is turbulent with updates, data and stories of both comforting and concerning nature. In fact, this article is coming to you from Day 10 of isolation for the Berkhout household. The good news: I can catch up on many of the side tasks and paperwork I've put off since fall (the "winter projects" that became "spring projects"). The bad news: I miss being in the greenhouse and seeing the whole team at Qualitree every day. I'm also running out of crannies to clean in my house.

It's very easy to miss a "job" when it feels more like a family. Qualitree is a second home and I couldn't speak higher of the team I get to share a table with. We're also incredibly fortunate to live in a beautiful agricultural hub of a city encased with titanic mountain ranges. My commute to work is a magnificent 11 minutes, eight of which are a straight shot down a back road through the countryside. I look forward to this drive every morning with my coffee to-go, stewing my brain on what the day will entail. The average

workday for a grower at Qualitree commands a wide variation of tasks, depending on the weather, the people and the requirements of any given crop. It demands diligence in planning and observation. Our growing team meets on a regular basis, sharing our notes and ensuring our objectives are organized. So, when COVID-19 is creeping in as a potential threat, we do what we do best: we collaborate, we observe, we plan.

In response to COVID-19, Qualitree implemented extra measures for hygiene and physical distancing. This meant rigorous cleaning, vast space between lunchroom seats, outdoor meetings and foot markers on the floor along the

planting lines. We've had to evaluate our operational processes and facilitate new guidelines while still striving to maintain quality and efficiency. The pandemic makes it necessary to simplify and smooth out processes. It makes us reflect how we prioritize and structure critical tasks and responsibilities. It also lends perspective and appreciation for those who we bump elbows with daily, like the workmates we'd used to sit directly beside and share a plate of lunch with. In the Growing Team and several other departmental facets, we sent those home who were potentially higher-risk or those who would need to step in in the event that other members of the team fell ill. I fell into both of those categories, as my husband is currently immunocompromised.

For the past year, the Growing Team has been focusing on cross training and the creation of standard operating procedures. While it wasn't always convenient, we would frequently jest, "Well, we want more people to know (this) in case (grower) is hit by a bus." At the time, it seemed errant public transit was more likely than a viral pandemic. We're fortunate to have prioritized this bench strength, as it's been integral to our Qualitree Quaranteam. Undoubtedly, this will underscore our future efforts in continuing our documentation and team building. In the meantime, our work-family will stick with our core values, find comfort in the crops, offer unwavering support for our customers and grow more cohesive than ever.

Given that we live in such a rural area, it didn't come as a surprise to notice that once folks started isolating, many in our communities turned to the garden centers. Not just the die-hard gardeners, but even those newer to plant hobbies; people who decided to trade in some Netflix episodes for hands-in-dirt time. I noticed new posts and comments in online forums and garden retailer sites ranging from planning and starting expansive vegetable gardens to asking questions about a new houseplant "pet."

Where we are in British Columbia, spring is underway. As the rest of North America wakes up seasonally, I'm hopeful that this period of isolation at home will cultivate appreciation to those new to the horticulture world and punctuate it for the many already elbow deep. Ideally, this isn't just for my own community right now, but extending across the continents and for the foreseeable future.

I'm cautiously optimistic for the horticulture industry post COVID-19. While we, our customers and many other businesses may face uncertainties, this is an earnest and hardy industry built on strong relationships that won't allow their people (consumers and workforce alike) to be taken down without resistance. I'm encouraged by the many homeowners returning to the garden, patio or finding joy in plants in their home. I'm reassured by the fortitude of my neighbors, suppliers, customers and colleagues. I've never been prouder to be a small part of Qualitree and the horticulture landscape as a whole, and I eagerly anticipate the day I can take my coffee to-go for my commute once again.

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## Emily MCKay

**Age:** 29

**Title:** Indoor Lead Grower

**Operation:** Walters Gardens—Zeeland, Michigan

**Q. What do you think will be the long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on your business, your customers and your community?**



The COVID-19 virus has quickly become a pandemic that's affecting the lives and lifestyles of many people. Even though the situation is currently unfolding, it's important to think about how it could impact our industry in the future. I believe the long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic will be positive for our business, customers and community. In times like these, I think it's increasingly important to stay optimistic about how the outcome will unfold. Below are some of the reasons I think the COVID-19 pandemic will influence our industry in a positive way.

Currently, we're heading into the spring season. With many people social distancing at home, I see a lot more people outside enjoying the sunshine. This is all happening during a time that's favorable for growing plants and this is to our advantage. Right now, it's more important than ever for the horticulture industry to adapt and continue to market and sell. We should take advantage of the fact that people have more time for hobbies, remind them that it's the prime growing season and highlight the many positive

benefits of gardening. Another area we need to look at is the local food industry, and how it can grow and thrive in this time of need.

One of the main things we can do is look at different methods of marketing and selling during this unusual time of social isolation and government shutdowns. There are strategies, options and resources out there to help find the best marketing methods for different types of horticultural businesses. One of the more uplifting things I've seen is one of Lansing's local corner stores, Quality Dairy, partnering with a local garden center to sell their products. The convenience store is helping them sell Easter Lilies when they otherwise would have had to take a huge loss for that crop. If we can continue to adapt and find innovative ways for the horticulture industry to market and sell products, the outcome will be positive and our industry may even thrive and grow.

When looking at how to market, one factor to consider is how our community members are spending their time since they aren't able to go out. This could lead to an increase in the amount of time they have to spend on hobbies that are conducive to social distancing. I believe that plants and gardening have the potential to be one of those hobbies and will gain popularity during this time. Some of the reasons for this are the mental and physical benefits associated with gardening. According to a report on the benefits of gardening, researchers "suggest that gardening can improve physical, psychological and social health." We should be marketing the therapeutic benefits of working with plants, along with the fact that people have more time for hobbies and that we're in an ideal growing season.

Another area of horticulture I believe will come out of the COVID-19 pandemic with a positive outcome is the local food industry. I'm very passionate about sustainable agriculture and food systems; it was my specialty in college. With restaurants being shut down and grocery stores having a hard time staying stocked, I see a surge in people trying to find an alternate sustainable food source. I believe this will lead to our communities leaning more towards supporting the local agriculture industry. This all comes back to marketing and creating awareness about the options that are available, and the many benefits of supporting local agriculture.

I've learned that supporting local agriculture and food benefits the environment, community and economy. If more people source food locally, there will be less transport of goods, more money going back into the local economy, and more people with the chance to get to know their food and farmers. There are a multitude of other benefits as well, along with many resources available to help define those. By highlighting these benefits and circumstances, the local food industry can continue to market, sell and grow.

How can we make this happen? There are different options out there to source food locally and a lot of people may



not even realize they exist. Our local food industry needs to focus on awareness, education and marketing as our local food producers adapt to accommodate customers in these unusual circumstances. One way I support local food is by participating in a CSA (community supported agriculture) program. Many farms are opening up online ordering or having small farm stands still running. With many people avoiding grocery stores and restaurants shutting down, now is the time for local food producers to market their programs and benefits. If they do, they'll come out of this crisis in a strong position.

The COVID-19 pandemic is causing us to look at everything a little differently. Many businesses and people will be greatly affected by this crisis. The situation will likely get worse before it gets better and I don't expect things to go back to the way they were before. Focusing on the long-term outcome and continuing to believe it will get better will help us all get through this. If we continue to move forward, finding innovative ways to continue to sell and market, our outcome will be positive.

This can be a big opportunity for the horticulture industry and local agriculture. Let's make the best use of the concepts I've talked about (and others) and continue to improve. If we do this, our businesses, customers and community will have a positive long-term outcome after the COVID-19 pandemic.

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## Arlan Van Dam

**Age:** 31

**Title:** Production Supervisor

**Operation:** Masson Farms of New Mexico—Radium Springs, New Mexico

### **Q. What do you think will be the long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on your business, your customers and your community?**



COVID-19 has created a difficult time for many people and companies; most everyone will feel its pinch. As the governor of New Mexico said, "This is no time to panic, but it is no time for business as usual."

Changes have already taken hold at Masson Farms and more change is needed in sustaining our future. The saying "we can sell everything during Mother's Day" won't fit with the year 2020 and the realization that COVID-19 may stick around is a sobering thought. Masson Farms of New Mexico focuses on a future of detailed planning and higher efficiencies, all while maintaining crop and customer diversification to counter subsequent phenomena.

A previous employer once told me, "Tell me today what you need for tomorrow and together we will get it done. Then tell me what you need for next week, next month and the next year—then watch us succeed."

Alexander Masson's grandfather first started the company in Kansas over 100 years ago, continuing his legacy through the Great Depression along with many other national economic challenges. The strong leadership of

Masson Farms of New Mexico continues to follow a positive course. Keeping long-term goals of the company in sight provides the ability to see past the COVID-19 pandemic. The need for planning not only the day-to-day workload, but preparing for what lies in tomorrow's world, remains prominent. The management team continues preparing, analyzing and ordering for next spring and beyond, holding strong to the understanding that increased

efficiency is key.

While always striving for efficiency, in a labor-driven industry where wages are increasing and the labor pool seems to be shrinking, we look towards technology. As Masson Farms adjusts from the current experience of lower spring sales, leaner hours and staying at safe 6-foot distances (with masks), “efficiency” has become a trending term in our workplace. Consequently, researching and utilizing some of the many new technological innovations, which may fit within our company’s specific needs, will help achieve this goal. Adding automation and searching to become more efficient allows us to increase our ability to pay attention to the details and maintain a diverse production of crops.

The COVID-19 pandemic shows the greenhouses that are the most diversified will come out stronger in the end. Continual discipline to maintain diversification through the crops that we grow supports a broader range of customers. Though this in itself presents its own difficulties, Masson Farms seeks to expand our arsenal of crops by adjusting how we market our products, thus gaining the opportunity for new long-term customers in the future. We’ve taken to social media along with our own sales data to provide the most desirable plant mix for our customers.

As a wholesale greenhouse, most of our direct customers are major grocery chains and big box stores. Some of our customers remain “cautiously optimistic” for the remainder of the spring and into the fall, while others are anticipating a recession in the fall that could cause a 5% to 10% reduction in sales due to the pandemic. The necessary precautions taken by these companies to keep their customers safe and healthy has, in turn, affected the sales of multiple categories, including floral, which can represent 3% to 4% of total revenue.

One hurdle that will need to be addressed is the grocery chains’ ability to distribute products during times of unexpected heightened purchasing. Many of our industry’s floral products were unable to be delivered because of overloaded warehouse systems. Correction of this will ensure the products that are planned and ordered flow in crucial times. Floral items displayed in customer’s stores are essential to the bottom line and set the tone for the consumer as they walk in the doors.

In the Horticulture industry, we’re in the happiness business. The plants that we grow instill joy to the end consumer and uplift our community. A friend recently posted on social media on how she left a local hardware store with her plant/flower hopes and dreams in her cart. When I hear these stories, I’m ever so uplifted by the influence that the horticulture industry has on the people in our community. We bring joy and happiness to those who purchase our products, which are emotions hard to come by in these uncertain times.

Today’s day and age where many people are so often in front of a computer or their phones, COVID-19 has subsequently created a need for real social interaction. The phrase “absence makes the heart grow fonder” really hits home when social distancing and only essential trips become the new normal. Our community begins to notice and appreciate the constants of nature and how it can bring us together. Through these times, our plants help represent a sense of stability and connection. The seasons will change and plants will bloom in the shorter days of fall, regardless of COVID-19.

So, as we continually push into tomorrow, striving to overcome the obstacles that are bound to be in front of us, we must be open to the changes and opportunities that present themselves. We’ll come out stronger, having proven to our customers and consumers that we’re an essential part of their businesses and lives. The COVID-19 era will soon be another piece in time to look back at and see the progress made. Ultimately, we’ll have grown positivity throughout our communities because remember—we’re in the happiness business after all. **GT**