GROWERTALKS

Cover Story

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Looking Back & Thinking Ahead

Jennifer Zurko

Anna Ball likes to say that 2020 was “the year of two viruses and a bacterium.”

It’s a simple statement for a stressful, complicated year of challenges for Ball Horticultural Company. It all started with a ransomware attack that hobbled Ball’s internal ordering and inventory system, followed by a Ralstonia outbreak on a crop of Ball FloraPlant geraniums. Then came COVID-19 that added an extra layer of chaos during the peak of spring while the entire Ball headquarters in West Chicago was also under construction.

Saying it’s been an interesting year for Ball employees is the understatement of the century.

But instead of being alarmist and panicking, Ball and its employees were able to take a step back and come up with a plan for every crisis that ensured service to their customers was never disrupted nor compromised.

If there was ever a year to be fluid and flexible, 2020 proved how important it is to be able to adapt to anything and not miss a beat while you’re in the thick of it.

I sat down with Anna, Ball’s CEO & Chairman of the Board, and her daughter Susannah Ball to talk to them about how the company reacted to such a tumultuous year, their future plans for the family business and the dynamics of a mother/daughter relationship.

First, the ransomware attack

On February 2, 2020, while we were all glued to our TVs to watch Super Bowl LIV, some very bad people hacked into Ball’s computer systems—right before the peak of the spring season.

“They obviously had been watching us,” said Anna. “These guys, [the FBI] said they could have been tracking us for a year to see when was the worst time to hit us. It would be like attacking Christmas-decorating companies in November. They do that intentionally.”



Although the ransomware attack completely shut down the system, Ball's IT Department was aware of the attack right away and jumped into action to recover all of the files and contact the authorities. It took a lot of hard, around-the-clock work from dozens of employees, but the system was only down for four days, when orders had to be taken the old-fashioned way. The hackers asked for an exorbitant amount of money, but Ball refused to pay; they knew they would be able to recover everything.

"We have a strong IT Department. But it wasn't just them that had to work 24 hours a day—it affected all of the employees in the company," explained Anna. "It was also Supplier Relations and Customer Service. Everybody had to help bring things back."

Ball isn't the first horticulture business to get hacked—and probably won't be the last. On the surface, it's surprising that anyone would be interested in trying to kidnap data from a plant breeding or distribution company; but then again, these people are criminals, said Anna. Perhaps they think hort businesses are easy targets because they assume they don't have the resources or money to fix the system, so it leaves them vulnerable and more willing to pay the ransom. Ball was having none of that.

"When IT was reconstructing our systems, they could see them trying to get back in," she said with a visible shudder. "It's really horrible when you think about it. I mean, it makes you feel like you've been violated. And it's creepy."

How exactly the hackers got into Ball's system still isn't known—the forensic experts and the FBI told them that it only takes one device that allows them to infiltrate. And as Ball is a global company with business ventures around the world, it could have come from anywhere. But since then, the IT Department has put in additional cybersecurity on all of Ball's systems and made extra efforts to educate all employees on recognizing phishing emails and avoid clicking on bad links. It's something they will have to continually do.

"The phishing emails get better every day because they learn what works and what doesn't," said Susannah.

"As you're getting better and better, they're getting better and better, so it's a never-ending thing. It's like any criminal," said Anna.

Then, it was Ralstonia

Shortly after the cyberattack, over 22,000 callused cuttings of Fantasia Pink Flare Geraniums were shipped from Ball FloraPlant's farm in Guatemala to a grower in Michigan over a five-week period. Once they were rooted and began to grow, 400 of them started showing signs of bacterial wilt.

Once tests confirmed it was *Ralstonia solanacearum* race 3 biovar 2, Ball was immediately notified by the Animal & Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) and told the operations who received any Fantasia Pink Flare Geraniums to dispose of them, along with any plants growing under or next to them just in case they were exposed. Ball also made the decision to destroy every Pink Flare that shipped—288,000 cuttings shipped to 288 greenhouses in the U.S. and 55 in Canada—whether or not they showed any symptoms.

Anna and Susannah said that a quick response and transparency to their customers were key to stopping the spread.

"We acted very quickly and got the word out right away," said Anna. "Speed was the whole thing. Luckily, it was at a time of year that we weren't shipping that many cuttings."

“Even though it wasn’t that many growers, it was still enough and it happened during their peak,” explained Susannah. “And during the height of the coronavirus. They didn’t know if garden centers were going to be open and we’re telling them they’ve got to dump a bunch of plants.”

The lessons that were learned after the first major Ralstonia outbreak in 2003 from another geranium supplier, which led to a quarantine of more than 800 growing operations, came in very handy. Luckily, the person who was in charge of working with APHIS and developing prevention protocols back then, Dr. Mike Klopmeyer, is still with the company, now as President of Ball FloraPlant. The relationships Mike has built with the USDA and APHIS over the years were instrumental in stopping and eradicating the outbreak, said Anna.

During the time of this interview in November, Ball FloraPlant’s farm had just been re-inspected and cleared for production. The complications stemming from the coronavirus dragged out the process because USDA inspectors couldn’t travel to Central America.

Finally, COVID-19

And what a segue into the largest elephant in the room: the COVID-19 pandemic. Ball wasn’t alone in feeling the effects of having to scramble to avoid business interruptions while their employees were juggling working from home, home-schooling their children, and worrying about their health and the health of their families. But being a global company worked in their favor in this instance.

“We were lucky because we have locations all over the world, so we could see what was happening—especially in China where it started,” said Anna. “So we followed China to see what happened and how they dealt with it. And it was hugely important to us because we shared all of these stories about what was happening in the places where it was just beginning and I think we were much better prepared for things.”

Anna said that even as states started to shut down, meaning most of the employees at Ball headquarters had to pack up and work from home, she wanted to communicate a sense of calm and optimism. The IT Department provided spare monitors and laptops for those who could work remotely, and the managers of those who couldn’t do their jobs from home (like in Seed Processing) created flexible schedules and staggered shifts to whittle down the number of people working together at the same time. Human Resources secured personal protective equipment and cleaning supplies, while also keeping the lines of communication open to employees, sending an email out every day during the first three months to remind employees to stay positive and to reach out if they needed help, professionally or personally.

“I was thinking about how we handled it, and what we did and what the philosophies were, and one of them was we made a conscience effort to stay positive without being Pollyanna,” said Anna. “I think optimism is a very powerful motivator and I think it really motivated employees.”

It wasn’t all positive—some of Ball’s joint ventures were hit extremely hard by the coronavirus pandemic. The markets in Brazil and Thailand are mostly event-focused, so most of the business was lost when events were canceled. And there were some order cancellations in North America in the beginning, but Anna said she never panicked.

“I always thought, ‘It’s going to be okay.’ But I’m just like that,” she admitted. “I think people overreact to things. A lot of people were gloom-and-doom and I just did not think it was going to be that bad.

“I did NOT predict that it was going to be a boom, that everybody was going to be gardening. I didn’t see that. Everybody sold out. And that’s never happened.”

Which made the bad news from the overseas companies and early cancellations easier to stomach—it turned out

that COVID-19 actually ended up being great for horticulture, one of few industries who didn't suffer significant losses. For weeks during spring and early summer, growers and retailers reported double-digit growth, some saying they hadn't seen numbers that high in over 10 years. Some hort organizations have estimated the industry gained 16 to 20 million new gardeners during the pandemic and one Canadian grower told Anna he thinks that 85% of those will return to garden another season next year.

One reader suggested *GrowerTalks* write an article called "How COVID-19 saved the floriculture industry."

Based on the numbers of mum and poinsettia sales, and early bookings, Anna believes there's hope that the upward trend will continue.

"It was like a billion dollar ad campaign we got for free during the last six months," she said. "If we really believe in our product like we say we do—that it improves your mental and physical wellbeing, and that it helps society and reduces crime, and all of those things that we talk about. If we really believe that, then those 16 million new plant consumers are going to come back because they're going to discover that."

Running to the hard stuff

Dealing with two viruses and a bacterium in one year is bad enough, but imagine having to deal with that while the entire inside of your office building was being gutted down to the studs and concrete for renovation, along with an addition that tore up the outside grounds, too. Employees playing musical desks, having to walk outside to get inside to the cafeteria, figuring out who can be in the office to stay at 50% capacity to allow for proper social distancing—all while having to conduct business as usual.

It's been a trying year, but the timing of the office "refresh" and new biotechnology lab addition actually turned out to be fortuitous. Most of the staff was home due to COVID, so construction was able to continue at a quicker pace, moving the date of completion up. As of press time, the office interior renovation was more than three quarters complete, with anticipated completion by Christmas. The new lab will be ready by early spring.

"It's a pain to have everything under construction, but you have to remind yourself that it's a positive," said Anna. "And we got every shipment out. It all goes to people, of course. Our new Seed of Success is 'Run to the hard stuff' and if you think about it that's what they were doing. They were in the hard stuff from January to now and they responded really, really well."

For the last 20 years, Ball's "Seeds of Success" have served as a guide for employees to work toward the company's main mantra, which is to "Color the World." A few months ago, these "Seeds" were updated and "Run to the hard stuff" was added. Susannah is on the committee that focuses on company culture and worked on the new "Seeds."

"We did a whole exercise to revamp all of our Seeds of Success and that was one of the ones we talked a lot about," she explained. "What's our culture? What makes Ball, Ball? And that was one of the ones that kept coming up. People in our company just like to get down to it, find solutions and get things done."

Ball's long-term plans

Since Anna has been in charge at Ball, employees would see Susannah in the office when she was home from school or in between her travels. Four years ago, Susannah officially joined the company and is working toward carving out her own role within her family's business as the fourth generation. She began as a product manager for PanAmerican Seed's HandPicked Vegetables program, working with the breeders and conducting trials. She was also in charge of coordinating Ball's Spring Trials event during the last two years.

In early fall, Susannah took on a new three-part role in the company, which continues her involvement in Ball's companies in Chile and South America, and their new partner in Mexico, Akiko. (It helps that she's a fluent Spanish-

speaker.)

Susannah is also co-lead (along with New Business Development Manager Bill Doeckel) of a new sustainability initiative to help create an overall strategy for Ball and guide its implementation across all of their locations.

Her third duty is working closely with Ball Seed's Director of Sales Jim Kennedy, where she will have the opportunity to learn more about the North American market and get to know the customers. Susannah will remain on Ball's Executive Committee of company decision makers.

It's a lot, but Susannah is excited and admits that she still has a lot to learn. A multi-tiered role involves her in other aspects of the company, while also allowing her to do something she's passionate about—sustainability.

"At some level, I kind of knew I would [eventually work at Ball]. But it definitely was a big change of mindset for me," Susannah admitted. "It wasn't something that necessarily appealed to me, to be in an office and being in business. Also, facing this new 'universe' that I hadn't really been involved in. It was scary. It's a ton of pressure. And I think the pressure came as much from myself as it did from [my mom]."

"I'm sure I put pressure on her without even saying it, especially since she's an only child and I was the majority owner," said Anna. "She would walk around here when she was a little kid and people would point and say, 'There's my future boss.' And she felt that and it really was a lot of pressure. It had to come from her to want to come in and to come on her own time. And at some point, I just backed off. And then it happened."

Susannah's new role is one of the steps in the succession plan that she, Anna, the Board of Directors and the Executive Committee have developed to ensure a smooth transition for future leadership and the continued progression of the company.

As I was writing this, Ball announced new organizational changes that Anna says gives them more "horsepower" at the executive level. Anna's role has been split up and Al Davidson, who was President of Ball Seed, is now President of Ball Horticultural, taking on all of Anna's direct reports and the day-to-day management of the entire corporation. Anna will continue on as CEO and Chairman of the Board in order to devote more time to strategy, resource allocation, industry relations and the future of the company.

The moves provided a domino effect of new positions and promotions for others within the company as well—Alan Rouse, who was CFO, is now President of Ball Seed; Jacco Kuipers, previously GM of Darwin Perennials, is now CFO; and Karl Batschke has earned the GM position at Darwin Perennials from Global Product Manager.

"It's really important that we promoted from within the company," Anna told employees during the official announcement. "We've been striving to be thoughtful in our succession planning and these moves open up a lot of possibilities for other people to move up in the future."

What's helped make the new leadership transitions run smoothly and ease some of the pressure off of Susannah is what she's learned from Loyola University's Family Business Center. Since 2015, she's been taking courses and attending peer groups with other people like her who find themselves facing a major decision: Do I want to be a part of my family's business?

Susannah said she came away from it learning more about herself and gaining the confidence she needed to realize that just because your family owns the company, doesn't mean you have to eventually run the whole show. In fact, it reinforces the importance of wanting to do it and earning it—something that Susannah says doesn't necessarily apply to everyone.

"A big thing we talk about in our classes is 'stewardship.' It's kind of a buzzword in family business," Susannah explained. "If you think about it, there are all of these people born into a family business, but that doesn't mean they

were born to be a CEO. People who become CEOs, most of them are MBA-types because that's what they decided they wanted to do. That's what their skill sets are.

"But for a lot of people in these business families, maybe they're not. Maybe they're born to be artists or whatever. But what matters is being responsible stewards. How do you ensure the business' success? How do you make sure you maintain the business' legacy? How do you keep the family ownership? And you can do that whoever you are."

"You found out you didn't have to be what I was," Anna chimed in.

"Right," said Susannah. "I don't have to be the CEO. I can be here; I can support the company. I can maintain the family involvement in a way that uses my strengths and benefits the company. It's finding a place where you can contribute in a meaningful way and make sure the business thrives."



Different personalities, but the same goals

When you sit down with Anna and Susannah, and watch and listen to them, you notice their stark differences. Anna sitting crossed-legged in the chair, dressed in a tweed skirt and stockings, a clip holding one side of her hair back. Susannah leaned back in her chair, wearing a flannel button-down shirt and khakis. Anna describes herself as more intuitive, impulsive and a rule breaker, while Susannah is analytical, cautious and a rule follower. Anna is more extroverted, coming into situations already armed with her opinions. Susannah is more shy and likes to sit back, take in the room and look at everything from every angle.

But despite their differences, they've maintained a steady and genuine relationship, even when Susannah was away at school for most of her childhood because Anna was a single parent who travelled while she was running a global corporation. And they both share the rare characteristic of being good listeners, while working hard and living simply.

And, as far as the company goes, they both take their stewardship of their family's business very seriously.

"If you're a family business, you have to figure out if you're a family-first business or a business-first business," explained Anna. "And we are a business-first business, which means that the business comes before the family. And it always has. That was my dad's philosophy and my grandfather's, and it's mine and Susannah's. What you look at is what is best for the business. Is it best to have an outsider running it and family just working in it, being stewards? Or is it best for a family member to be running it?

"That's our goal—to put the best people in charge because the business comes before the family. Just because you want to run the business, that's not your choice. You've got to do what's best for the business." **GT**

If you'd like to reach out to Anna or Susannah, you can email them at aball@ballhort.com and sball@ballhort.com.