

GROWERTALKS

Acres & Acres

1/1/2022

Willisms

Chris Beytes



CHRIS BEYTES

A Wisconsin grower once paid Dr. Will Healy this unusual compliment: “You know, Will, you have the nicest way to say, ‘This is the crappiest crop I’ve ever seen in my life.’ And you feel good about the fact that you’ve just been told, ‘This is the crappiest crop I’ve ever seen in my life.’ You also then turn around and tell me what I need to do or what I could do to make it better.”

Will, the well-known, world-traveling horticultural sage and mentor for Ball Horticultural Company, is retiring after a 30-year career as a technical services specialist, and I thought I’d honor his departure by sharing some “Willisms”—memorable phrases Will has coined over the years that colorfully describe the solutions to the common cultural, technical and operational problems he’s encountered during thousands of greenhouse visits.

“There isn’t a single thing that I know that a grower didn’t tell me,” Will admits. “I just listened to them. There’s not an original thought in my mind—just a clever repeat!”

Here are his favorites:

“Fish grow in water, roots grow in air.”—He shares this visual with growers who struggle with overwatering, poor root systems and other watering issues. (The visual came to him in Korea as he watched koi swimming in a pond.)

“Shrink is what you do that you don’t get paid for, so stop working for free.”—Will says he tells this to a grower when he’s standing in an operation “and I see these people doing stupid” (see “don’t do stupid,” below). “For every plant you throw out, it consumes the profit on anywhere from four to six plants that you sold,” Will says. Inefficient processes, and wasted steps and movements are also shrink. Look for them and eliminate them.

“You work too hard; let’s simplify this process.”—Will illustrates this point by describing a grower spraying for a pest, getting no results, spraying a second product, still no results, then spraying a third time, and a fourth and ... “The point of this,” he explains, “is sometimes you have to stop what you’re doing and ask yourself, ‘Am I working too hard? Am I making this too complicated?’ Plants are simple. People are simple. Growing should be simple. Let’s not overthink it.”

“You can’t bring it back from the dead.”—All growers suffer from what Will calls “resurrection syndrome,” a desire to save unhealthy or less-than-perfect plants. But sometimes the cost of fixing one plant at the cost of all

those other plants isn't worth the effort. "At some point you just have to declare it dead because it's not worth trying to bring it back from the dead," he says. "If it's not perfect, accept the fact, get rid of it—but try to make sure you don't do it again."

"Don't do stupid."—Planting cuttings that are mushy or limp. Sowing seed that's past its sow-by date. Sticking poinsettia cuttings that have whiteflies. Says Will in his inimitable way, "If you knowingly know that it's not going to work, why would you do it anyway?"

"Bump and dump is not profitable."—Too often, growers can't resist the temptation to attempt to salvage an unsold crop by bumping it up into a larger container. Don't do it. Cut your losses while they're small. Don't make them worse (see "don't do stupid," above).

These last three quotes Will credits to three of his mentors: Len Busch of Len Busch Roses, "the quintessential innovator extraordinaire," Will says, who gave his quote during a talk to one of Will's college classes; the late Richard Brolick, co-owner of Zelenka Nursery; and his dad, William Sr., who owned a hardware store in St. Cloud, Minnesota.

"Growing is like going to school: If you do 90% of the tasks 90% of the time, and 90% of the time on time, you get an 'A' crop. But doing 100% of the tasks 60% of the time, and only 50% of the time on time, gives you a 'failed crop'."
—*Len Busch*

"I don't mind my growers taking a class and failing, but I hate it when they keep taking the same class again and again and failing every time. Learn from your failures!—*Richard Brolick, to Will, regarding a plant initiative that turned out to be a bad idea*

"Never ask a person why they failed. Only ask how they succeed, then help them improve on that success."—*William "Bill" Healy Sr.*