

GROWERTALKS

Acres & Acres

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Three Reasons We're Awesome

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I found my Zoom conversation with Carl Atwell of Gemplers to be refreshing for three reasons.

First, it reinforced one of the things I've always loved about our industry: people, and specifically families, remain at its center. I don't know how long it can remain that way (more on that in a bit), but for now anyway, we can call ourselves a tight-knit industry of family businesses.

Second, it reinforced the lure of our industry to outsiders. Carl was an outsider from Sprint and Lands' End ("big-company-land" as he calls it). He wanted more out of his career, and interestingly, he's found it not by going bigger, but by going smaller and getting closer to his customers.

Lastly, it reminded me that the challenge of agriculture—whether on a tractor or in a greenhouse—is part of its attraction. As much as you curse, I'll bet most of you get a sort of twisted thrill out of solving the problems that pop up at your business on a daily basis.

As for Carl, he's an easy-going, easy-to-talk-to sort of business owner—just like you and every other greenhouse, nursery or garden center owner I've ever met. He didn't come across as corporate and guarded like I might expect from an MBA; quite the contrary, he was humble and eager to learn.

In fact, it was he, not I, who spent the first 10 minutes asking questions. He didn't want to waste the chance to pick the brain of a new acquaintance who might offer a different perspective on things. I finally had to scold him—"Hey, who's the journalist here?"—and regain control of the interview.

Back to point one: family. In my online research about Gemplers, I noted their emphasis on family. "Family owned and fiercely independent" is one of their taglines. Again, it sounds like most growers and retailers I know. On their home page, under "Why Gemplers," the first reason is, "Family owned. We treat you like a neighbor, not a number." You won't find that claim at Amazon. A fact Carl brought up, in fact, when he said, "Do you feel warm and fuzzy when you buy from Amazon? Does it make your heart feel really, really good about what you're supporting?"

Point two: The lure of our industry to outsiders. We seem to be especially attractive right now. Have you watched "Growing Floret" on the Magnolia Network (formerly DIY)? It follows the trials and tribulations of flower farmers Erin and Chris Benzakein on their Skagit Valley, Washington, flower farm, Floret. Only, when I say trials and tribulations, what I mean is the romance, idyllic beauty and wholesome goodness of a flower farm. At least that's how it comes

across. Even the mud looked picturesque. I can imagine thousands of viewers, burned out from the rat race, all cashing in their 401(k) to start their own flower farms.

Now, I'm in no way knocking Floret, or cut flower farming; I'm just saying people want what we have! Sure, it looks fun from the outside, and it's darned hard work once you're on the inside, but none of us would trade it.

Which leads to point three: The constant challenges our industry poses are part of its appeal. I'm confident this is so, otherwise, why would so many of you stick around here for your entire careers? Why would so many of your businesses be multi-generational? And why would you be smiling instead of crying (or even smiling while crying) after enduring an April like many of you had this year?

Wondering what Carl would say about whether he's found his new career in service to agriculture more or less challenging than he thought it would be, I emailed him to ask.

"The answer is ... more challenging *and* more rewarding," he answered. "More challenging, as the buck stops with you ... there isn't one thing you are responsible for, it's the whole enchilada. More rewarding because the buck stops with you. There aren't layers of people or decision-makers—you can impact change. I could say a million things more about both ends of the spectrum ... the constant self-reflection to get better and find your way is exhilarating and exhausting, but I wouldn't want it any other way." **GT**