

GROWERTALKS

Acres & Acres

9/1/2022

Looking Back to Look Forward

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I've been around this industry a decently long time—we opened our greenhouse doors in May of 1983 and immediately received our first box of Ecke poinsettia cuttings (V-10s). But I enjoy learning from folks who've been around even longer and who've been on the front lines as a grower or retailer their whole career. They've experienced so much and been through so many good and bad times that they can be depended upon to put things in perspective for us newbies.

Paul Cavicchio is just such a person. Jen Zurko and I had the pleasure of sitting down with him and two of his staff members in the Cavicchio offices in Sudbury, Massachusetts, in August to chat about how the fourth-generation business is navigating the current state of the industry.

Paul, a third-generation Yankee businessman, doesn't mince words, beat around the bush or sugarcoat things. In fact, quite a few times he'd make a frank remark, then laugh and say, "Don't print that!" But he's got a solid foundation of experience dating back probably half of the business's 112-year history and it seems to provide Paul with some guideposts for dealing with all the crazy things affecting today's marketplace. Here are a couple:

Weather. If you need confirmation that weather is always the biggest factor affecting plant sales—bigger than interest rates or gas prices or inflation—just ask Paul.

"It really is about the weather," he says, specifically when asked about their 2022 spring season. "Through the spring we went like this with the weather"—he waved his hand up and down like a boat going over the waves—"We got lucky and we sold through everything ... things weren't moving and then they took off ... And we were having a great summer until the 95s and 100s happened, and now it's slowing down."

The same applies when looking forward. We asked Paul how they're planning for Spring 2023. He answered simply, "For '23? You tell me how the weather's going to be and I'll tell you how we're going to do."

Of course, there are other factors that can hurt sales, especially local issues. When riots hit Milwaukee a couple years ago, businesses there felt the pain. My business was in Brevard County, home of the Space Center, and after the Challenger disaster in '86, the local aerospace industry went into recession, which affected my garden center and florist customers. But week in, week out, season after season, it's temperature and precipitation that have the most impact on whether or not customers buy plants.

Inflation and recession. Another hot topic that has folks in the industry scratching their heads and losing sleep. Not Paul. In fact, I asked him what he loses sleep over. "Nothing," he replied. He hasn't lost sleep since they went to central greenhouse heat and installed remote alarms.

But as for worrying about inflation?

“What good does it do?” he questioned back, adding, “I kind of think people want to buy plants. People need plants in their lives.”

Then Paul did what I most enjoy when learning at the knee of an industry veteran—he recounted a lesson HE learned as a young man from another industry veteran.

Back in the early '70s during another recession, Paul had a vendor sales rep at the nursery who was hoping to get an order for some supplies. Paul expressed some hesitancy in making a purchase because of the economy. The veteran salesman looked him in the eye and said, “Paul, the only things that sell during a recession are booze and flowers.”

Paul placed his order—and increased it by 10%, in fact—and sold out. He’s never forgotten that lesson.

Most recently, the Great Recession taught us that we are recession-proof. Does that apply to inflation, too? Including through-the-roof gasoline prices? Well, back in the '70s, gasoline not only went up in price, there was a shortage of it, too, with long lines at the pump. But I don’t recall reading about a sales slump in my old copies of GrowerTalks (although they did write a lot about energy conservation, which led to double poly, twin-wall glazing and heat-retention curtains).

Some of you haven’t been around long enough to hear these lessons, which is why I’m sharing them. George Santayana said, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” I’d say that those who CAN remember the past are bound to benefit from it ... or at least get a better night’s sleep. **GT**