

GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Business

7/1/2023

Defining True Innovation

Terri McEnaney



TERRI MCENANEY

Innovation. This word can be overused and often reduced to a marketing tagline. However, it can be so much more—an ethos or driving force in an organization. Without it, we become stagnant, and with it, we unlock endless opportunities.

I began my career at 3M Company as an accountant tracking costs, and analyzing results and projections for future investments in innovations. 3M has developed several processes to help encourage and facilitate innovation. These include its “15% rule” (dedicating 15% of employees’ time to innovation), its 30/4 rule (targeting 30% of sales from products introduced in the last four years), and its commitment to science and sustainability. This was something that stuck with me when I returned to our family business over 30 years ago.

Bailey Nurseries was already introducing new plant cultivars at that time, many coming from sports found in our own fields and others from external breeders or universities. Endless Summer Hydrangeas was a game changer introduction in 2004 that forever transformed the marketplace, bringing the first-ever remontant (reblooming) hydrangea to market and helping make it the category-leading species it is today. Innovation is not just flash-in-the-pan tactics. For innovation to push business, it should be multi-pronged and drive toward a long-lead goal.

That concept continues today with the introduction of Eclipse Bigleaf Hydrangea in the First Editions Shrubs & Trees collection. Not only do we utilize the marketing machine behind the brand to broaden the national distribution, but it’s also an example of our discovery of new genetics. This is the result of our long-range goal of introducing cultivars developed from in-house breeding efforts at Bailey Innovations, our breeding operation in Athens, Georgia, led by David Roberts. It might have taken eight years from sowing the seed to entering the marketplace, but that innovation of introducing revolutionary genetics was deliberate and supports our goals of being leaders in new plant genetics.

Innovation is one of our core values at Bailey and it’s not just a marketing tagline. That spirit is lived day-to-day by employees being involved in reviewing processes, researching technological advances, and visiting and collaborating with other growers from around the world.

One of our biggest constraints in recent years has been the lack of reliable labor to complete our production work to maintain the high level of quality and consistency of product and service. This was causing great stress on our managers and the decision to expand our

H-2A guestworker program was made. We now have over 400 valuable employees from this program who are bringing experience, a strong work ethic, reliability and ideas to continue to improve our results.

This year, we re-engaged with FlowVision to involve more people in looking at the entire process, from order placement to product delivery. Our capital investments over the past two years have reached record levels, as automation and technology advancements provide new opportunities to work smarter, faster and with less reliance on so many people to get the job done.

Some of you may recall the days of Mid-Am and Management Clinic where “New Ideas” sessions were held in a clever format of five-minute presentations by the best nursery folks around to share their best idea and help raise the bar for others. Dwight Hughes worked on these diligently each year and it was a great coming-together event that demonstrated the kind of industry we are.

We’re competitors, but can also help one another. This showed that it wasn’t just about a good idea, but how companies implemented those changes and would bring concept to execution. Adding value and keeping things fresh gets people excited and wanting to do more. How fun is that?! And that continues today at Cultivate. It keeps our thinking fresh, introduces us to new products and encourages us to meet forward-thinking colleagues.

As we look to the future of our industry, there are many examples I see where innovation and creativity are thriving. As we’ve seen margins squeezed, we’re justifying investment in equipment to achieve a better return. As we look to future management and leadership development, organizations like Seed Your Future are needed to bring awareness and career-pathing to fill these roles with new and enthusiastic entrepreneurs. Scholarships and research funding through organizations such as the Horticulture Research Institute (HRI) engage the next generation and fund important research to make our industry thrive and be more sustainable. Our national and state associations are vital assets to our industry to represent us from an advocacy standpoint, as well as providing tools and resources to strengthen the professionalism and financial expertise to compete and be successful.

The world of exploration and opportunity is open to all of us, and who knows what that next new idea will do to transform you and your business for the future? Enjoy discovering what’s next and take action to bring your idea to fruition. **GT**

Terri McEnaney is a fourth-generation owner and Chief Executive Officer of Bailey Nurseries, headquartered in St. Paul, Minnesota. She can be reached at terri.mcenaney@baileynurseries.com.