

# GROWERTALKS

## Guest Column

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### An Homage to the End of an Era

Zoltan Kovacs



Pierre Bennerup, the former, long-time owner of Sunny Border Nurseries in Berlin, Connecticut—which closed its doors permanently in 2017—is a true pioneer of perennials. It's because of his vision and contributions that the modern perennial plant business in the U.S. is what it is today.

Working with Pierre and GM Marc Laviana from 1995 as an employee, and then later as a friend and industry colleague, gave me the deepest and best perennial plant knowledge. Today's perennial market was built by some of the perennial pioneers like Sunny Border Nurseries because of its focus on providing unique genetics, representation of breeders around the world and continued focus on consumers. My time at Sunny Border gave me a lot of the perennial knowledge I use in my current role at Dümmer Orange, but it also gave me the industry recognition to move forward in my career when Pierre's wife Cheryl nominated me for GrowerTalks' Young Grower of the Year award, which I was lucky to win in 2008.

*Pictured above and below: The first greenhouse built by Robert Bennerup, Pierre's father, who started Sunny Border Nurseries in 1937 in Norwalk, Connecticut. The nursery moved to its final location of Kensington, Connecticut in 1947.*



My deep love for perennials started in 1995 when I worked at Mahoney's Garden Center, which was supplied by Sunny Border Nurseries, and this is when I began my relationship with Pierre and Marc. Not only did they supply us the highest-quality plants (in very unusual brown square pots invented by Pierre), but if there was a new or super-exciting variety on the market, Sunny Border was always the first to market with a special program in their distinguishable pots.

Today's perennial market is booming with new introductions, and better varieties and marketing concepts, but we should never forget where all of that came from. As an industry leader from the very beginning, Sunny Border Nurseries established so many of the new ideas, techniques and varieties that are still in the market today.

Sunny Border was one of the first perennial businesses to establish tissue culture production and market varieties specifically for green roof applications. And let's not forget about the first vegetative echinacea on the market, Kim's Knee High; the first true Zone 3-hardy variegated polemonium (Stairway to Heaven); the first pink flowering pennisetum (Karley Rose); and countless other now-well-known varieties like Veronica Sunny Border Blue, which has been on the market since 1947.

*Pictured right: Pierre with Sunny Border basil introduction Pesto Perpetuo.*

There was no other nursery in the United States offering such a wide range of products and diversified programs. It can be argued that the market-leading programs from Sunny Border—like mail-order plants, succulents, temperate perennials, and hardy alpenes and groundcovers—established today's wide range of perennial plants available to the home gardener.



Sunny Border Nurseries was not just known in Connecticut—they were one of the most well-known perennial growers, with a great audience worldwide. Pierre and Marc never turned down visitors' requests and were always happy to show their new varieties and programs throughout the year. When I worked at Sunny Border, I always noticed that if anybody was a somebody in the world of perennials, they visited at least once, but often it was two to three times a year.

*Picture left: Sunny Border GM Marc Laviana with a young Zoltan Kovacs at a trade show.*

I have the highest regard for our industry as a whole, so please do not take this final quote from Pierre, which he said in an interview decades ago, too much to heart. He was describing how it takes time to produce and market perennials—much like it does to enjoy a good bottle of wine. And I think it shows Pierre's exceptional life and personality, and it's funny how much the industry has changed since.

"The difference between perennial growers and annual growers? Perennial growers are like fine wine drinkers; annual growers are like beer guzzlers."

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*Zoltan Kovacs is a Product Manager for perennials for Dümme Orange.*

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*"After I graduated from college and joined the family business, I needed more plant knowledge to be in a position to help grow the business. At that time, Sunny Border Nurseries was a leader in the industry that I looked up to and also a customer of ours. Marc and I were a couple years apart in age and I was privileged to establish both a business relationship and personal friendship with him. He was a self-taught horticulturalist with an amazing knowledge of plants and significant growing skills. He was also hard working, and very dedicated to Pierre and Sunny Border Nurseries.*

*"Pierre was influential in the founding of the Perennial Plant Association and I got a firsthand viewpoint of his knowledge and passion for the perennial industry in those early years of the association. Pierre and Marc were always looking for new and rare plants to add to their vast catalog listing. I attempted to visit Sunny Border on a*

regular basis and Marc tried to visit Walters Gardens with the same dedication.

"I learned a lot about perennials and the perennial market from both Marc and Pierre—both always willing to share their expertise and knowledge. This was invaluable in my career. And I still remain in contact with Pierre."

—John Walters, Executive Chairman, Walters Gardens

"I visited Sunny Border over 20 times from 1989 until four years ago. My first visit was with Kurt Bluemel [horticulturist and landscape designer] and Klaus Jelitto [founder of Jelitto Perennial Seed], and I was directly impressed. Pierre is an excellent host and his know-how of plants was amazing. Marc also knew his plants very well and showed me everything. Later, it was Zoltan who helped bring the nursery to where they were when they closed.

"Sunny Border was one of the leading perennial nurseries in the world. They had so many new and good plants and it was always a great pleasure to visit that place. I am still very thankful to Pierre, Marc and Zoltan for the time they always took for me during my visits. They were highlights in my life!"

—Luc Klinkhamer, perennial expert based in the Netherlands

