

GROWERTALKS

Cover Story

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Tackling the Tough Stuff

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Photography by William Santana



For some young up-and-comers, it takes months, or even years, to learn how to be a manager and to lead a team. Some may have to take management classes. Or stop at every rung of the ladder for a time in order to move up to a supervisor role.

It took Matthew Tyson four months.

As a hort professional, he came into the industry later than usual, but he came prepared with life skills and an appreciation for teamwork and process.

Spending years on the football field and having parents who instilled a strong work ethic helped.

Making lemonade from life's lemons

Born and raised in Jupiter, Florida, Matthew's childhood was filled with family and football. His parents owned a dry cleaners, but when the Great Recession hit in 2008,

they had to close the business and find work elsewhere. Matthew recalls his mother working double shifts, nights and weekends, and his father worked as a car service salesman to make ends meet.

"They were always working 60 to 70 hours a week and they always preached to me, 'You have to work,'" he said.

Out of high school, Matthew earned a full scholarship to play football at Alabama State University, but almost immediately he struggled.

"I lost my brother a couple of years before and I had a lot of things weighing on me. I just don't think I was ready," he admitted.

He thought a change of scenery may help, so he transferred to a small school in California, but it was actually worse. He was bunking with seven other guys in a small house, having to sleep on floors and couches, and he was still trying to cope with his brother's passing. His grades started to suffer and he didn't have the GPA to stay on the

football team.

“It just wasn’t a healthy state for me and I felt like I just needed to re-group and re-ground myself,” said Matthew. “I needed to focus on me to see what I actually wanted for myself.”

He left and moved back home to Florida where he found work with his friend’s family landscaping business. He started as a general laborer, digging palm tree holes and working out in the field, but he quickly moved up the ranks and began to realize how much he liked it.

He enrolled in night classes at Santa Fe College in Gainesville, thinking that landscape architecture would be in his future. But it was when he transferred to the University of Florida and took a class called Greenhouse Management that he really heard his calling. He changed his major to Horticulture that semester and signed up for an internship at Costa Farms in Miami.

As a late 20-something, he was a greenhouse intern still going to school, but at least the path ahead was clearer.

“I didn’t really nail down that I wanted to be in horticulture until after my internship at Costa Farms. After that, I knew this is what I wanted,” he said.

Learning and coaching

Matthew’s internship at Costa Farms was during the summer of 2021, which consisted of working in the mist houses in the propagation area. For one of his internship projects, he was tasked with moisture management and trying to figure out how to stave off *Xanthomonas* on their ficus crop. The folks at Costa Farms felt he did such a good job they offered him a full-time position. Matthew graduated in December of that year and started with Costa in January 2022.

After a little over a year, he was promoted from an assistant grower to grower responsible for producing 16 million plugs and liners in five mist houses in three separate locations. Matthew credits Alejandro Pantoja, one of Costa’s technical directors, as one of his mentors.

“There was a month where we spent every day together and we walked the houses,” said Matthew. “The task that he gave me word-for-word was, ‘I want you to take the mist house to another level.’ And he explained to me how and why things need to be done in the order that they’re done.”

Everything up to the point of his internship was only learned in the classroom, so Matthew admits that “as far as knowledge, I had zero,” so he really went into his role quite green (if you’ll excuse the pun).

“I spent a lot of time with the different growers at Costa, walking and learning,” he said. “It lasted for about two or three weeks before I started to get the hang of things. We would see issues and areas that needed improvement, and we would figure out the best ways to handle it.”

Bert Martinez is another of Matthew’s “coaches” at Costa Farms and the one who nominated him for the Young Grower Award. One of the things Matthew learned from Bert is to think of the propagation area like a hospital ICU: the grower is the doctor who prescribes the medicine, and the process leads are the nurses who treat the patients (plants) to get them in shape to move on to the next stage.

“I needed some clarity on some things and, to me, that analogy was very clear and now I use it, too,” said Matthew.

“Only the most technically prepared and conscientious doctors should be charged with that responsibility,” said Bert. “It is hard to believe that a recent college graduate would be able to take on that responsibility. Matthew is an exception to that rule.”

Bert also said that in his short time as a full-time employee, Matthew has implemented quite a few changes and

improvements. He's conducted trials using UV-C lighting to control diseases and it's been a win-win for Costa because it's allowed them to use less chemicals and save on labor costs, as well.

"If we're spraying something three times a week, that's three times a week someone has to load up a tank, drive it to the house, get out and spray it," said Matthew. "And a lot of them have REIs, which then limits our ability to be able to work with the plants for X amount of hours, so we lose flexibility. What I like is the fact that, at the push of a button on my boom, I can control disease. I don't have to request an application or wait for somebody to come spray. It has no REI and has very little cost."

To manage his own team, Matthew said that he takes a "training the trainer" approach. He has a total of five houses in three areas spread around Costa's property, so he has to rely on his staff to make sure that everything is working smoothly.

"I try to coach and train them to be my eyes, my ears, and to kind of approach things the way I would want them approached as far as quality," he explained. "I need to have a lot of confidence and trust in my apprentice growers in order to succeed. For me, what that requires is constant coaching, constant communication and constantly working together in every situation."



That was one thing Costa didn't have to teach him—how to be a teacher and coach. Playing football for years gave him the foundation for being a good, effective manager. In his finalist essay that was published in the June issue of *GrowerTalks*, Matthew said that football provided a valuable training ground for being a leader.

"That's where I think I got all of the leadership skills from and that work ethic, too," he said. "I always revert back to my high school football coach. We had a motto on T-shirts that said, 'Overachieve,' and I've kind of taken that to heart. Even when I was in school, or even now, that overachieve approach, I always think when I'm not doing something, somebody else is. And I've tried to reinforce this through my team as well."

Matthew's physique matches the middle linebacker position he played in football—imposing enough to tackle a running back, but nimble enough to move around quickly. And it matches his demeanor, too. He's very serious about following protocols and producing quality, but he also cares deeply for his employees and team members.

"Since I am new to management and leadership, I think a lot about how I approach situations, and sometimes I wonder if I did it correctly," he said. "Are the people happy? Am I creating the right work environment? Is everybody on the same page? Do they have clarity? Do they know what the task is and how to execute it? I just want to make sure that they know that they're doing a good job."

Always working, always improving

Matthew experienced a lot of change in a short amount of time—both good (his new career path) and bad (the loss of his brother, and most recently, his mother). But like the old saying "everything happens for a reason," he looks back at that time as an almost necessary part of his journey.

"I feel like I needed all of that to be able to kind of fall into this," he said. "Without all of that, if everything would have worked out and I would have gotten a business degree, I probably would have hated it. It was almost an advantage to not know [what I wanted to do] until a little bit later because when I finally picked something, I was sure of myself."



Without some of those hard knocks, maybe Matthew wouldn't be where he is today. And it certainly makes him appreciate where his career is going even more.

"As for my success, I definitely think it's a two-part answer because you have the initial work ethic that was instilled in me in my younger days from my parents, from playing sports, through coaches," he said. "But then in my professional career, 100% would be the leadership at Costa Farms. They're very supportive, they're open-minded to different ideas and they really care."

Still being a newbie to this industry, Matthew isn't thinking too far ahead, but like any team player, he's focused on what lies ahead and how he can be better.

"I guess next steps would be to see things at a more holistic view. Right now, I'm very narrow-sighted because all I see is propagation in young plants," said Matthew. "But I think it would be really nice to be able to understand it at more of a full-cycle aspect. Ultimately, the next step is head grower. I guess that's where I'd go from here."

Matthew's responsibilities at Costa Farms keep him quite busy, but he's also been busy at home with a 3-month-old baby daughter, so there hasn't been a lot of time for sleep lately. He drives up to Jupiter to see his dad as much as he can and he tries to get away to the Keys once in a while to fish and spend time on the beach.



And, of course, football, which will always be a part of his life. Even though he's not actively playing anymore (which he said he does miss), he still follows his favorite teams and watches their games (notably the New York Giants and the Florida Gators).

Before he came to work at Costa Farms, he coached youth football and is hoping he can go back to doing that again someday. Through every aspect of his life, Matthew is the consummate coach, always guiding and always working.

"I don't ever think that I'm the smartest person in the room," said Matthew. "But what I do pride myself in is that I do feel like I can outwork anybody." **GT**