

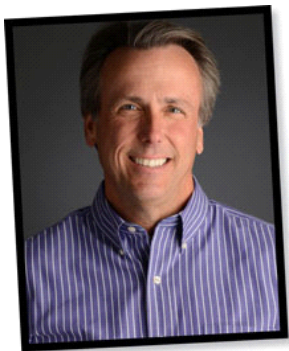
# GROWERTALKS

## Acres & Acres

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### 30 Years of Learnin'

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This month, I celebrate 30 years with *GrowerTalks* magazine and 40 years (plus six months) in the horticulture industry (not counting my time minoring in ornamental hort at UF, where I excelled at Plant ID I and II, Use of Ornamental Plants in the Urban Environment, and Vegetable Gardening 101—a robust preparation for the field I was about to enter).

Anyway, in that time, I've learned a few things. Six, actually. I've probably mentioned them before, but here it is in one place, the sum total of my 40 years. Do with it what you will.

**This is the most diverse industry on the planet.** The people who call horticulture home occupy every point along the political and social spectrum—from the far right to the far red, from those who credit God with creating the flowers to those who credit Mother Earth, Darwinism or ancient aliens. Yet we all share a profound love of plants, and we can break bread or share a beer peaceably and with laughter. Find me another industry so diverse and yet so friendly. I've looked. It doesn't exist.

**Growers around the world are the same.** I learned this on a trip to Taiwan. My hosts took me out to the countryside to visit a few growers. None of them spoke a lick of English (and, of course, the only Mandarin I know is the canned oranges), but it didn't matter—I could tell from the tone in their voices and expressions on their faces what they were saying. Like when I asked my host to ask a chap, "Are you making any money?" The smile and the shrug and the shake of the head was the same I'd seen in Homestead and Portland.

**You don't make money growing plants; you make money selling plants.** Horticulture has a knack for attracting people who are great at growing plants, but lousy at running a business. Back in the good old days, you spent \$1 growing a plant that you sold for \$8, so you could get away with it, and many growers built massive businesses in spite of themselves. Today, it costs \$7.75 to grow that \$8 plant and there's no margin (literally) for error. If you don't know how to sell your product, you'd better hire someone who does.

**For every trend, there's a countertrend.** I stole this from Anna Ball, who breaks it out anytime someone waxes poetic about the latest trend. I do a lot of trend-tracking myself, and this truism reminds me that not only do you not have to follow the latest trend, it might be more fun to zig when others are zagging. For instance, I know an extremely successful garden center owner who has no website, no social media ... no online presence whatsoever.

**Ask the "egg salad question."** One day, at an editorial lunch, hortistician Marvin Miller, perusing the menu, said to the waitress, "The egg salad—tell me about it." I guffawed, thinking it was a silly question. I mean, it's eggs, it's

mayonnaise. But Marvin chided me. "It could have onion, it could have pickle, it could have paprika." He was correct, of course, and I now apply what I call "the egg salad question" to every interview. It means simply to dig deeper into a topic. "Tell me about it. Tell me MORE about it." After 40 years, it's easy to assume I know all the answers. I don't. Sometimes I don't even know the questions.

**Never burn bridges.** Advice I share with every young person starting a horticulture career. This is a small industry, a close-knit industry and, as I mentioned before, a diverse industry, full of strange bedfellows. You never know who you'll be working with or for or selling to or buying from. Try to get along with everybody and you can have a long, comfortable career.

I can think of a bridge I'm glad I didn't burn. When I took the job with Ball Publishing back in 1993, I remember being grateful that we'd paid all our Ball Seed bills before closing our business! Otherwise, they might not have offered me the job ... or they'd have withheld my old debt from my paycheck! **GT**