GROWERTALKS

Features

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# The Value of a Balanced Life

*Jennifer Zurko*

One of the hardest things to do in this industry is to keep work and home separate. Do you find yourself checking email while on vacation? Or skipping networking opportunities to slog over spreadsheets in the hotel when you're traveling? And, of course, there's no such thing as a weekend during spring.

We're all guilty of this. And sometimes we feel guilty when we let work permeate into our personal lives. Why? Because we know that we, as humans, need a break. And we're bad at allowing ourselves to take a break.

As the generations have progressed, there's been more of a value put on work/life balance. Jen Polanz, Bill Calkins and I—as Gen Xers—like to claim that our generation was the first to tip the workplace scales, juggling meetings and projects in order to make room in our daytime schedules to take our kids to the doctor or watch their soccer games. (Something our Boomer parents rarely did.) It was a slow process and usually required putting in a lot of time, an understanding boss and some weekend catch-up time, but there was a gradual change.

We know that Millennials and Gen Z actively look for jobs that allow for a flexible work schedule so they can have personal fulfillment as well as professional, which is why we asked this year's Young Grower Award finalists how they balance work and life in this industry.

You may be reading this and thinking, "You can't have a work/life balance in horticulture!" But our Millennials friends disagree—you can, but you have to put the work in to get that balance. You have to actually prioritize your mental and physical health, put your foot down and say, "This next hour is just for me."

You also need to hire a team you can trust so that you don't have to do everything yourself. Sometimes it's hard to put that trust in someone who doesn't own the business, but not being able to delegate is a quick path to burnout.

And all three of them acknowledged that they also have the luxury of having more access to technology and automation than previous generations that helps them be more efficient and save time.

Oh, and you need a hobby! If your whole life is the greenhouse, you'll never leave it. If you have interests outside of work, you'll want to take the time to spend on those. I think we all need to be reminded about these lessons once in a while.

**Find out who the winner is for our 20th Annual *GrowerTalks*/Ball Horticultural Company Young Grower Award at the Unplugged event during Cultivate'24 in Columbus, Ohio, being held at Gaswerks from 8:00 to 10:00 p.m. on Monday, July 15.**

Our panel of judges will choose the 2024 *GrowerTalks*/Ball Horticultural Company Young Grower Award winner based on their nomination applications, their essays and a telephone interview. We'd like to thank our esteemed judges for their time and support of this award. This year's judges are:

**Anna Ball**, CEO & Chairman of the Board, Ball Horticultural Company, West Chicago, Illinois

**Art Parkerson**, Owner, Lancaster Farms, Suffolk, Virginia

**Amy Morris**, Vice President, N.G. Heimos Greenhouses, Millstadt, Illinois

**Matthew Tyson**, 2023 Young Grower Award Winner, Costa Farms, Miami, Florida

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**Drew Groezinger**
**Age: 26**
**Title: Owner**
**Operation: Clara Joyce Flowers—Stockton, Illinois**

While prepping my morning carafe of coffee, I look at my list of daily objectives, begin to check in with our staff and team members, and start to think. I ponder countless ideas throughout this morning ritual, however, every point comes back to this remarkable industry where I've created my home. I look back at my experiences within this green world and pinpoint key mentors and leaders that shaped my processes, influenced my experiences and helped me build my company to what it is today. For their graciousness, I'll forever be grateful.

While I continue in thought, I consider what I've shared and contributed back to these individuals as well. When I started my business in 2016, I had a fresh, exciting, high-schooler's perspective on life. I was anchored in technology and efficiency while also wanting to build a career and life in this specialty agriculture industry. Through years of trial and error, learning by doing and building from both successes and failures, I'd like to share a few points that I and my generation can share with the minds, hearts and bodies that are holding the door open for us.

**Grasping technologies for daily life**

I would venture to say that many of us have a love/hate relationship with social media. The importance of a social media presence has been served to us in more ways than we can shake a stick at. From a set of eyes that have scrolled through Facebook since sixth grade, there's a fundamental truth to the importance of a social media presence in today's market. Growing and building a presence within online communities and platforms provides an opportunity for each of us to show a sliver of our everyday lives to those who follow us. We're able to share the faces and hearts behind our plants and our businesses while building strong customer relationships. One of my favorite things about social media is that these platforms are truly ageless. It brings me so much joy to help an experienced grower set up and build their accounts, watch them grow into the platforms, and succeed!

It would be short sighted to say that "new" technology stops at social media. As I spend my winters traveling the country visiting a wide array of growers, I'm constantly reminded of the importance of investing in new technologies. Specifically, there's value in investing in technological systems that lessen the physically laborious load of certain industry tasks. It's important for us "young-uns" to remember that we get one body to make it through the life that we've been given. This may be a good reminder for all of us! Implements and tools like container fillers, transportation conveyors and automated watering systems are crucial investments. As we continue to see many small independent garden centers close up shop, it's a huge reminder for us to continue to invest in mechanical assistance, allowing us to preserve one of our most crucial resources—our bodies.

**Prioritizing trust with clarity**

Oftentimes, I notice a perceived disconnect between mentor and mentees that may lead to confusion or distrust in the workplace. I've learned that simple, clear, concise channels of communication allow us to overcome this hurdle. This past season, I was able to experience an app called Todoist in action. This app provides a platform for you and your team members to actively view a task priority list, edit said list, make notes, ask questions and achieve goals. This platform allows managers and team leads to be on the same page and visibly communicate on one shared space, allowing traceability and accountability.

Embracing technology has brought a depth of efficiency to our program. I can prioritize research, and order or schedule by utilizing mobile technology from my cell phone and iPad in my greenhouses or while on the road. I'm no longer tied to my desk and am able to complete responsibilities in the field and on the road when necessary. By prioritizing on-the-go task management, my team and I have created the foundation of trust and communication that allows our project list to be properly managed and completed.

Additionally, we rely heavily on technology in the winter months to support our team's growth as individuals and trust in their employer. Granting work-from-home opportunities for office support team members allows these individuals to do their daily tasks from the comfort of their own space, improving time management. When on-site hours can be slim, we give the opportunity to employees to take home small, repetitive tasks for them to complete at their convenience. Tasks like packaging thank you gift bags, labeling pots and tags, writing labels and signage are all hands-on projects that can be done during the off season and don't have to happen on the farm.

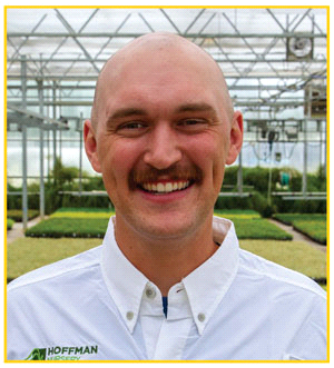
**Embracing work/life integration**

Aside from setting hard, impassable boundaries, I'm really not sure that the concept of "work/life balance" truly exists in the green industry. After all, we do work in agriculture. Regardless of if we embrace the term "farmer" or not, embracing the rhythms, seasonality and "'ya make hay when the sun shines" mentality brings our work year into perspective. Like many of my conventional farming ancestors, we all experience a moment for breath and rest at some point in the calendar year. By taking advantage of these times, focusing on recovery and healing, and firming up plans for the upcoming seasons, life finds time among the work.

My 98-year-young great-grandmother always reminded me, "If you love what you do, you'll never work a day in your life." While I know that a few days have definitely felt like "work," I've never shied away from building a sense of community, comradery and respect with customers and employees alike. Taking moments for a team meal once a month ensures that we all can slow down to enjoy our "work" together and see each other as human, not just the person that works in the office or the guy out working in the field.

Additionally, our annual "Friends of the Farm " dinner continually pulls engagement, buy-in and passion for what we do on a daily basis. These dinners are an opportunity for our staff, their families and key customers and vendors to meet, break bread and share stories, while being surrounded by the flower fields. Sometimes digging deep and finding that love for our industry is what can keep pulling us back, day in and day out. As stewards of this growing green industry, it's crucial we all lend a hand to bring evolution and innovation to the sector that we know and love.

Well, my carafe of coffee is gone and the crew is busily working away on their day's agendas. I'm off to check in with our managers—they help me run this business better than I could do on my own. ■



**Trevor Stark**
**Age: 29**
**Title: Assistant Head Grower**
**Operation: Hoffman Nursery—Rougemont, North Carolina**

Millennial growers are known for understanding the importance of a healthy balance between responsibilities at work and their hobbies outside of the horticulture industry. I'm a grower, as well as an avid skateboarder, and the two aren't always the easiest mix. Because of the inherent nature of plants, the horticulture industry presents particularly difficult time-management obstacles.

Another well-understood trait of young professionals is making time for travel. When a new skatepark was built in Huntsville, Alabama, and my friends were all planning a trip, I was presented with a problem. What happens when I'm nine hours away from the nursery? Plants won't stop growing for a long weekend. The solution for me is always careful planning and utilizing technology. These systems allow me to stay active in my hobby without compromising my responsibilities as a grower.

No matter how much one enjoys their job, burnout is always a possibility. For you and your staff, being fresh and motivated makes you more productive. Our generation understands that putting in more hours doesn't lead to the most efficient work output. The horticulture industry brings especially difficult challenges with the perishable nature of plants. Changing weather can throw a wrench in even the most sound of plans, especially in areas and seasons with volatile weather patterns.

The ever-changing nature of plants brings the potential for more stress, making time management and a work/life balance that much more important. Burnout can easily lead to poor decision-making in an industry where what you do and when you do it can make or break the survival of a crop. Additionally, labor shortages are a consistent issue in the industry, making employee retention more important than ever. Employees that have time to relax outside of work are likely to be happier at work and more inclined to stay on the job.

The first step in avoiding burnout is ensuring that team members have sufficient weekend time off. In our case, this is made certain by our rotating weekend calendar consisting of five growers working one Saturday and Sunday every five weeks. Weekend duties are typically low stakes and straightforward, where a clear and concise checklist can help us get the job done in just a few hours. This involves confirming that all the automatic irrigation programs are running properly, keeping an eye out for damage to greenhouses, and then irrigating the more water-sensitive crops. Cross-training growers in all areas of your department enables you to maintain crops with consistent expertise regardless of scheduling. This ensures that the growers can take time off even if their designated areas have crops that cannot be left untouched for multiple days.

Also, planning and efficient use of time is necessary to ensure sufficient time off and a healthy work/life balance. This involves maintaining an "investing time" mentality, meaning thinking ahead about the tasks to be done over a given number of days and plan to either take care of them before leaving or have another team member handle it while you're gone.

Growing up with technology in our everyday lives has prepared members of our generation to comfortably integrate technology into our industry. For example, the use of automatic irrigation to maintain minimal labor hours during weekends and vacation time is a method that comes naturally. This allows growers to set up systems that can operate untouched for longer periods of time. In this way, growers can prioritize other responsibilities during the work week and enjoy more time off.

Having interests and hobbies outside of work keeps me healthy and relaxed, which I believe makes me a better

grower. Being able to engage with my creative pursuits outside of work is what I believe motivates me to experiment, learn and try new things inside the greenhouse. Rather than both my time and mind-space being overwhelmingly occupied by growing, I come back to work on Monday with clarity and focus on my crops. My generation brings ideas like these to the industry in a distinctly natural way through our views of how work passions and non-work passions are meant to interact. ■

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**Carleton Stuecker**
**Age: 30**
**Title: Head Grower of Propagation**
**Operation: Metrolina Greenhouses—Huntersville, North Carolina**

What an opportunity to attempt the lessons of a generation when it comes to something as culturally and historically significant as balancing work and life. I believe there to be unique values my generation has discovered in taking a different approach to the investment in time and energy of each. If we imagine a pendulum, with one side that represents work and the other that represents lifestyle, my generation is standing in the middle, looking each way, and wondering where to stop the swing. When we look back and forth, we see the accomplishments and sacrifices of the generation before us. Where does my generation stand in time? What are our priorities?

There are ever-present challenges of production horticulture: the dynamic nature of live products, sourcing, weather, pests, etc. However, with innovations in technology, education and experience removing many of the barriers that past generations faced, we've freed many companies to focus on the quality of hours rather than quantity. My generation has seen the priority to use and record high-quality information, to anticipate rather than react, and that by setting deadlines and building collaborative teams your business can stay innovative and your people can develop their personal lives in harmony.

What's the value of work as a grower? As mentors and fellow growers of mine have expressed countless times, "To understand your plants you need to be around to listen." There's no replacing the value of walking your crops, reading your plants and making mistakes when trying a new program, as well as the extra hours spent late in the evening, walking through the greenhouse with a clear mind. Or the 8:00 p.m. perusal of the latest article on controlling gibberellic pathways in vegetables (accompanied by a glass of whiskey or wine—your choice). These small investments in time can be the difference of success and failure of an endeavor.

This work can be the inspiration for others to see new pathways for the challenges they face. The generation before me spent incredible hours, often working 60 to 70 hours a week or more to explore and learn new crops, building programs with novel genetics from the ground up. However, to add to their schedule, they faced limitations in their irrigation and production execution because of a lack of technology and equipment. Tasks we see today being performed by robotic arms, biological release drones and ESS sprayers were once done by hand. This puts a huge burden on individuals to work extra hours to get the job done. The plants cannot wait until Monday.

The business has matured and innovation has removed much of these excessive working hours, while presenting new challenges to growers today. The avenues of success have become more defined, retail spaces have become more consolidated, consumers have higher expectations and the margins for success have narrowed. Your failures must be minor and quickly adjusted to stay on track. With this higher expectation comes stronger competition, demanding that teams stay at the forefront of practices and what the customer wants. In a time when all of our endeavors must strike success, the importance of strong decision making, daily execution and team alignment on

objectives from start to sale is at an all-time high.

To meet these new standards, we cannot rely on the traditional means of elbow grease alone. This requires that attention, collaboration, communication and creativity be fully engaged while at work. To operate at this level requires that you have adequate time for rest and reflection. The importance of a healthy home life is paramount, to recharge and find new avenues of joy and creativity. Prioritizing a refreshed, alert and open mind and body is a prerequisite to success.

Two methods my generation has employed to maintain the opportunity for a healthy lifestyle in coordination with work have been setting time expectations for tasks, and connecting and building teams of different skill sets to collaborate on projects. Step one is to set your target. Always aim for your 40- to 50-hour work week. Your goal should be to increase the quality of your work to such a degree that the job can be completed in a reasonable amount of time. Although you won't always be able to accomplish this, by setting the goal and holding yourself to it, you'll find the quality of your work will naturally improve to hit the standard. In turn, you may find that you work 55 hours instead of 70.

Next is to realize that the work is endless. Part of the joy in working in our industry is that there's always more to learn and it's in a constant state of change and new obstacles. With this comes the potential for never turning off "work mode," leading to a degradation of your energy and inspiration. Motivation will decline and with it quality will falter and you'll no longer be able to meet your expectations. Recognize when your quality is waning and pause. Rome was not built in a day. To avoid this downward slide of industriousness, one needs to set boundaries that are realistic to their responsibilities and, more importantly, train and develop team members to share the load.

Unless you would prefer to spend every waking moment of your life in a greenhouse (at times, an enticing proposition to me) build teams that you can trust, share information with and delegate responsibility to maximize productivity. Gone are the times when one person can drive everything. The team is everything! Staying at the top of performance requires collaboration and trust.

My Millennial generation sits between a generation full of experience, and one with whom new and powerful technologies come second nature. Align the team toward a common goal and teach them the value of working together. By taking the approach above, the job is achieved with better results in a shorter time. Suddenly, the time you want—and need—to spend with your family and friends will seem attainable. With the new investment in your personal time, you'll find yourself more equipped, energetic and capable of hitting the ever-changing demands of your work.

The core discovery that my generation has made about the importance of balancing work and life can be distilled to this question: What does balance mean to you as an individual, as a family and as a part of a company? After assessing, take intentional steps to plan, organize and set goals for achieving that balance.

The strategies outlined in this essay—setting timeframes and building collaborative teams—are two ways my generation has achieved harmony between our work and home lives. The time spent cultivating personal interests will enrich and improve the pursuits of your profession and the accomplishments of your profession will fuel the enjoyment of your personal life. The pendulum swings both ways, after all.

But, most importantly, grow exceptional people and plants! ■

