

# GROWERTALKS

## Growers Talk Production

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### A Unified Horticulture Industry

*Austin Bryant*

Just out of college I remember sitting in front of my first business mentor having a quick discussion concerning business, politics and religion. Without mentioning names, he said, "They all three go together, but none of them should be discussed at the same time." Putting on our business industry hats and leaving all personal political ideals set aside let's go over a few points I believe will be paramount this coming year.

**Tariffs on imports that have no domestic manufacturing competition:** In the first quarter of 2021, the industry experienced something I thought would never happen. A Canadian peat shortage due to extremely high demand coupled with frozen unharvestable peat fields sent growers into panic mode wondering if the next load of soil was coming and how much it was going to cost. Hard times made resourceful companies work overtime in finding new solutions and possible substitutions for Canadian peat. However, here we are in 2025 using the same mix with only about a 10% reduction in Canadian peat compared to the original pre-shortage mix of 2021.

I'm sure many other companies tried to respond similarly, but it's proven very hard to find a media that carries the same quality per cost as Canadian peat. I would completely agree with the administration's decision to place a tariff on imported peat IF we had American peat fields that yielded the same quality source of media as found in the Canadian far north. With no comparable substitution for Canadian peat and no domestic small fiber peat fields, a tariff can serve no value except to raise the allocated cost of inputs for growing the plants, which will push higher cost at retail. The advocacy team at AmericanHort and several other industry associations have submitted letters to Congress asking for an exemption in the 25% Canadian tariff that would be placed on peat.

**Labor:** I remember my dad more than 30 years ago complaining government wasn't allowing the correct number of work visas to handle the agricultural needs of the country. The high demand for ag labor coupled with the economic prosperity of the United States and multiple executive administrations who ignored enforcing immigration laws have created a generation of pseudo-citizens. BOTH sides of the aisle have encouraged the problem through complacency by not reforming ag immigration law.

I believe most of the politicians in D.C. don't know what an "illegal immigrant" really looks like. We have this image of someone that just arrived within the past couple years and has no real ties to the country except for the current job they hold. Coming from a highly Hispanic county in Central Florida where agriculture production accounts for more than 90%, I grew up in a public school system with friends who never knew they didn't have a Social Security number. It wasn't until they wanted to apply for college that a parent had to have a devastating conversation with a young person who had no real citizenship here or really any connection with Mexico. (Some of them don't even speak Spanish.)

We need to be proactively lobbying for a new program that will allow undocumented, sometimes multi-generational families, to come forward and have the opportunity to establish citizenship over time, all without removing them from the current labor pool. This industry cannot afford a deport-and-let's-wait-and-see-what-happens attitude. I see this possible crisis as an opportunity to break the multi-term labor stalemate that's been on both sides of the aisle. There's positive work to be done in immigration reform, and no matter which party presses forward with it, there will surely be criticism from the other side.

There's positive momentum building in modernizing the H-2A program by instating caps on annual H-2A wage increases. This would allow H-2A to stay more affordable during a possible unstable domestic agricultural workforce labor period. H-2A was originally created for shorter term row crop farms and still needs lots of improvement to better suit the horticulture industry. The Society of American Florists (SAF) was in Washington, D.C., in mid-March lobbying with Congress to make this happen.

These are just two examples of current hot-button political issues that, if not handled correctly, can have real potential to drive production costs uncontrollably higher. The horticulture industry has made a lot of headway in the past five years establishing the importance of horticulture and floriculture in people's everyday life. We have a new generation that's accepted plants in the home as more of a general standard rather than a lavish item.

I've always said, "Houseplants increase a family's standard of living without increasing the cost of living." We want to keep plants affordable as an everyday retail item. With today's efficiencies and growers using best management practices, it can be rather tough to find places to reduce cost without severely impacting the quality of the product leaving the nursery.

I mentioned just two national organizations (AmericanHort and SAF) who have political action committees attached to each one of these topics of labor and tariffs, along with others. Your participation in Washington, D.C., is important. If you don't communicate that an issue affects you adversely then the politician assumes you don't care. From topics like EPA and chemical availability for niche crops to labor and tariffs with federal taxation, you must have a voice and be active. Don't expect someone else to magically voice your concerns on your behalf.

If you aren't active with a horticultural industry political action committee, please consider starting. Nothing puts teeth in the mouth of our industry organizations like real businesspeople showing up in House and Senate offices in D.C. Nobody can tell the story of your business and how the laws written can help or hinder your growth better than you. Be that voice. **GT**

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