

# GROWERTALKS

## Acres & Acres

4/1/2025

### Community

*Chris Beytes*



CHRIS BEYTES

That's what our newest, youngest customers are seeking, or so I'm told by a 30-year-old architect-turned-pandemic-plant-dad-turned-trade show entrepreneur.

I met Kenny Nguyen in February at PlantCon Orlando, the third of the new plant community events he's launched since 2023 when he started PlantCon Houston. PlantCon Dallas followed in 2024. Next year, Kenny hopes to hold 10 PlantCons in cities around the country.

I wrangled a press pass to PlantCon Orlando because it was only 30 minutes from my house. And also because I was intrigued—I'd heard about it at TPIE, the trade show for the tropical plant industry. A few folks there were planning to exhibit. I had no idea what to expect.

Entering the hotel conference center, I was struck by the youthfulness of the crowd, the piercings, the dyed hair, the ear gauges ... and by the tattoo artist at work in a booth by the entrance. I thought I'd stumbled into a barista convention.

There were plenty of less flamboyant plant people, as well, and those of every size, shape and color—a veritable melting pot of plant geeks, all clamoring for the coolest variegated and fenestrated aroids (still the best bait for attracting newbies to the houseplant hobby, it seems). The exhibitors, too, were an eclectic mix. I mentioned the tattoo artists; someone else was selling plants and vintage Nike basketball shoes. In another, a tarot card reading was taking place. Most offered plants consisting of a stem and a couple of leaves for hundreds of dollars. Influencers live-streamed from their iPhones. Rapper Rocco Elliot, famous for his plant-themed songs like "Just Me and My Plants," performed that night.

The passion of this gardening sub-culture was absolutely fascinating to me. I had to know more. So with the help of Sarah Cantu, PR and Communications Director for the non-profit With Heart Collective, the parent of PlantCon, I caught up with founder Kenny to get the scoop on the event and his audience.

"We realized that right now there aren't really any hobbyist or enthusiast plant conventions for people who are just in it for the hobby and for all plants," he told me after we'd stepped outside to escape the noise. "What exists right now is like the International Aroid Society and TPIE ... these are either trade shows or they're very specific. And these had been run for a while, so I thought a lot of the Millennial and Gen-Z generations were feeling a bit alienated from those spaces, so I thought that [PlantCon] is an event I would like to go to—I want to create something for people who are younger, to be included in this horticultural hobby, because this is how we shepherd it into the next

generation and keep the hobby growing, keep the plant economy growing and be sure everyone has a place in it.”

And how do we, the traditional plant industry, get to know these new plant lovers better?

“I think all of it is about the opportunity to connect with your community,” he answered. “I’ve made friends going to garden centers and bumblng by somebody and making a comment about a plant that they’ve picked up ... we start to chat about it, about their plant journey, and I’ve made friends that way, so ... if people know that there are opportunities to make friends and meet people who are like them and share their interest, it has so much appeal beyond just purchasing.

“Because gardening and plants can be an isolating hobby,” he continued. “A lot of it you do in isolation, on your own, right? It’s not really a group activity a lot of times. So the only group activity part of it is the shopping. So if you can bring that community aspect into the shopping, I think that will draw a lot of people. It resonates with the Millennial and Gen Z generations who are coming into the hobby now.”

If you’re a retailer, you probably know some of these new customers. They may even work for you. I hope you make them feel welcomed and appreciated. Ask them questions, learn what they and their fellow non-conforming houseplant enthusiasts want. Because some of them—the most passionate like Kenny and his friends—may lead us into the future. **GT**