

# GROWERTALKS

## Cover Story

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## Taking Chances That Paid Off

*Jennifer Zurko*



Many horticulturists say that they were born to grow plants. For Isabela Chamorro, this is true in the literal sense.

Isabela's first memories are playing around in the dirt on her father and grandfather's farms where they grew and harvested dragon fruit, tomatoes, bell peppers, corn and beans. She was always inquisitive, asking them how they grew the plants and helping out during the harvest.

During her third year in college, she couldn't deny that agriculture was in her blood, so she decided to make that a focus of her studies. This is when she discovered another side of growing plants and that was growing

flowers.

After she graduated from college, she applied for a job at Las Limas, one of Ball Horticultural Company's off-shore production farms located in Nicaragua, working in the lab, testing for plant pathogens. After a year and a half, a position in the tissue culture area became available, where she was oversaw rooting and propagation of the stock plants.

After she left Las Limas, she found herself "in between," trying to figure out what she wanted to do with her life, when her mother, Claudia, learned about CAEP, an exchange program where young adults from all over the world find training and internship opportunities. Isabela interviewed with a couple of different companies and earned a spot at Mahoney's, a grower-retailer with seven garden center locations and one production farm in Massachusetts.

### Production ping-pong

Isabela laughs when she admits she didn't know exactly where Massachusetts was—meaning how far north it was. She battled some homesickness in the beginning and getting used to cold weather, but putting all of her energy into learning her job at Mahoney's helped get her through it.

From the start at Mahoney's she worked with perennials and dove in head first, learning everything she could about production. Then she was moved to the annuals greenhouse, doing everything from watering to printing tags.

"I was everywhere," she said. "And that helped me a lot, to be honest, because it helped me to be where I am today."

When her internship came to an end, she went back to school for a year, learning and even doing some teaching herself. Then she applied for the same internship again so she could go back to Mahoney's. The timing worked out for her and for Mahoney's because she came back just as the person in charge of growing their fall mums quit, so she took over. Again, Isabela bounced around, working on different crops and eagerly soaking up everything she was learning. Then in the winter of 2019, Mahoney's asked if she would like to be in charge of their entire perennials production full time. Isabela jumped at the chance.

"That's where everything technically started," she explained. "I took over the whole project."



**Isabela with her boyfriend Andrew Mahoney and their puppy, Luke.**

## **A setback ... but with a happy ending**

Things were moving along—she was running the perennials production department at the Chelmsford store and learning everything she could. It was May 2020 and the COVID pandemic was raging across the country, so Mahoney's was trying to manage all of that during the peak of spring.

Then one day, Isabela felt a very sharp pain toward the back of her neck and collapsed right where she stood. When she awoke in the hospital they told her she'd had a brain aneurysm and that she would need surgery. While recovering in the ICU, she ended up getting pneumonia, which set her back a bit. A month later, she was back at work at Mahoney's, her bald head wrapped in a scarf after losing her hair from the surgery. Never one to take it easy, Isabela was getting cabin fever and was determined not to let this setback hold her down. But she also had to get used to some of the new changes her body was going through, physically and mentally.

"That aneurysm totally changed my life," she said. "I was more active before that; now I'm a little more slow. My memory doesn't work as well. If we are talking and I have a thought and I don't say it, minutes later it is gone. But it's a blessing I didn't end up paralyzed."

Another good thing that Isabela got from working at Mahoney's is that she met Andrew Mahoney, her boyfriend of six years and a member of the third generation of the family business. They were together the night she had her aneurysm and he was the one who called 9-1-1.

"He saved my life," she said. "He's my hero."

## **Always learning, always growing**

John Percuoco, the manager of Mahoney's Chelmsford store, was the one who nominated Isabela for the Young Grower Award and one of the reasons he said she deserved it is because of her willingness to teach others what she knows.

"Isabela embodies the culture of what Mahoney's Garden Center strives to be on a daily basis," he wrote. "The precise care, attention to detail and her willingness to not only teach, but help others is something that is not only genuine, but helpful to our entire team. She has become a stalwart for our company in just a couple years. Her reliability and willingness to drop everything for others is something that we know we can always count on. The continued education she gives us and her consistent efforts to improve processes continues to strengthen the Mahoney's team every day. Her entire mindset has become infectious at certain locations and has only made us stronger as a company through her efforts."

Isabela credits John with teaching her much more beyond the plants. He's an operations guy, who worked at other retailers like Macy's, so she wanted him to teach her what he knew about running a store and how to interact with the customers.

"I'll always ask if they need help. If I see someone that's struggling, I will go and just start helping," she said. "Sometimes I feel that people are really shy about asking or too proud to ask for help, so it's easier if someone asks. I've been in situations that I wished someone asked, 'Do you need help?'"

"At the end, that's part of our job—to educate the customer on what they need, what they want. I want to give them the answers they need so they feel confident in buying the plant."

She also said that, from the beginning, Mike Mahoney—second-generation owner—has been her mentor and teacher for the growing side of the business.

"Mike has been teaching me how to grow, down to all the details," she said. "He's one of the smartest, brilliant, creative people that I have ever met."

Isabela pretty much grows and cares for the 100,000 perennial plants that Mahoney's sells in their seven garden centers and for landscapers by herself. With help from the seasonal workers, she does the pinching, watering and monitoring every day for 13 greenhouses starting at 6:00 a.m. And as she's been gaining more and more experience, it's helped her make some changes and improvements. She changed their growing media and fertilizer regiment to improve quality, and incorporated automation to cut down on time and labor. She also works with the store managers to figure out which perennials they should be offering based on what their customers are asking for and trends that they're seeing.

Even in the six years she's worked full time with perennials, she's noticed an uptick in demand for them.

"People are going crazy for them right now," she said. "And our customers are looking for natives because they want pollinators everywhere. That's something I'm trying to push right now is to have a native pollinator program for Mahoney's."

The perennials Isabela grows come in all forms—seed/plugs, URCs, tissue culture—and Mahoney's offers a wide variety, with the most popular being hostas, daylilies and peonies. But they make sure they stay up to date on the new genetics by keeping in touch with the breeding companies and attending industry events. In her essay published in the June issue, Isabela said that one way garden centers can make an impact is by providing a diverse product

offering.

"I think sometimes we get stuck on what we know," said Isabela. "I'm always trying to find ways to know what's new. What's trending? What do customers want?"

## Plans and dreams



When Isabela talks about what drives her passion, she mentions the connection she has with the plants she grows—something that she's felt since she was a child growing up on her family's farm, crawling around in the dirt.

"I'm creating something, I'm growing something," she said. "I see life in my hands. They're not talking to me, but I try to understand them, and if I give them all the love, I feel that they're answering me."

"I know I sound crazy, but I get to share this beautiful result—flowers, color—with the community. I'm here helping at the Winchester store today and a customer walked out with a whole cart of plants that I grew, that I

took care of. And I always tell them that I grew them. I like to tell the story behind the plant. I think customers appreciate more when they know all the effort and love that was put (in) to make that plant look gorgeous."

Three years ago, Isabela and Andrew moved in together and they've just adopted a puppy they named Luke. When they're both not at the greenhouse and garden center, they like to hike and sight-see in New Hampshire. And Isabela keeps the after-effects from her brain aneurysm from progressing with creative activities that keep her mind occupied, like crocheting and painting, and doing puzzles and sudoku. She's also pretty handy in the house. Growing up, it was only Isabela, her mother, Claudia, and her sister, Gabriela, so when something broke, she was determined to know how to fix it.

Looking ahead, Isabela said that she plans on staying at Mahoney's well into her career until she's ready to open her own greenhouse business, which is her dream, and where she's quick to say will only include perennials.

"Nothing else," she stated. "You need to take one thing and master that thing."

When that day comes, it'll be another example of a time when she was faced with a choice and took a chance. For Isabela, it's worse not knowing what could have been.

"In the end, I'm here because I took a chance," she said. "In life, it's about that. Of not being afraid to jump or try. Because what if you win? What if you get something? I think this world is about chances. And I'm here today talking to you because of that." **GT**