

# GROWERTALKS

## Acres & Acres

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## 25 Years in Rear View

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I remember December 31, 1999, like it was just the other day ... Laurie and I celebrated the end of one millennium and the start of the next with a bottle of Dom Perignon (which I'd secured for the occasion at a duty-free in Europe) and a Lou Malnati's sausage pizza, and we wondered if our computers were going to work the next day.

Ah, yes, Y2K! And the dot-com crisis, the financial crisis, the COVID crisis ... you know, the first quarter of the 21st century has been an exciting time to be alive. Let's relive some of the highlights, shall we?

**Y2K Bug (January 1, 2000).** Remember all the hype and fear surrounding the notion that computers wouldn't know what to do when their internal clocks hit 12/31/1999—would they know what comes next? Or would they just shut down? It highlighted for the first time the vulnerabilities of our computer systems, both public and private.

**The Dot-Com Bubble (2000–2002).** If your company had “.com” in the name, investors were throwing money at you, even if you had no profits or viable business model. In GrowerTalks' archives, you can find numerous mentions of well-known breeders and growers partnering with newly minted .com companies promising to take over the internet (I even got offered a job by one).

**Hines Horticulture buys Lovell Farms (March 2000).** Investor Madison Dearborn bought Hines in 1995, but 2000 was the peak for Hines Horticulture, the poster child for grower consolidation, when they hit a sales mark of more than \$400 million from 13 locations. This was the year they bought Homestead's Lovell Farms for a reported \$92 million.

**Plant brands (2000-2010).** Proven Winners started the trend in the '90s, but now everybody was launching a “brand” ... even if it was nothing more than a printed pot. There was The Weather Channel, Gardening for Dummies, Martha Stewart (at Kmart), Simply Beautiful, Nature's Décor, The Flower Fields, HGTV Home, Hort Couture ... and who's left?

**The World Trade Center Attack (September 11, 2001).** One of those events where you remember exactly where you were when you heard the news. It shut down air travel and even forced Ball Publishing to cancel GrowerExpo

2002. Our industry saw supply chain disruptions, fuel and freight cost increases, and additional security protocols at the borders.

**The Great Recession (2007–2009).** Triggered by the collapse of the sub-prime mortgage market, this directly hurt woody ornamental growers because of the decline in new construction. Thankfully, that was temporary, and the market rebounded quickly. As for the rest of horticulture, we found out we were “recession-proof,” as “staycations” inspired folks to fix up their homes and yards with our plants.

**The rise of social media and smartphones (2006 – ).** I mark this as the launch of Facebook (2006) and Apple’s first iPhone (2007). Yes, we had the Blackberry, but the new “smartphone” (whether Apple or Android) was set to land in every grower’s pocket and change how they conduct business. And social media has democratized communication and promotion to each other and the end consumer.

**The collapse of Hines (August 2008).** After the big spending spree and years of retail pressure, weather losses and debt strain, Hines Horticulture filed Chapter 11 bankruptcy. After this, acquisitions became much more thoughtful.

**Impatiens Downy Mildew (2011 – ).** A disease known since the ’40s, but rarely seen, IDM first started showing up in impatiens around 2004. But it wasn’t until 2011 when major outbreaks occurred here and abroad. Sales of the most popular bedding plant dropped by 50% or more. Some retailers stopped selling *I. walleriana* altogether. Never before had a disease impacted a single species of bedding plant.

**The COVID-19 Pandemic (2020–2022).** For a month or two, we didn’t know if our industry would survive. Once we were deemed essential, we didn’t know how we’d meet the insane demand. As with The Great Recession, folks were again staying home—this time out of necessity—and they invested in houseplants, garden flowers and vegetables to help pass the time, cheer themselves up, and entertain and educate their home-bound children.

Some list, eh? I’ve heard folks talk about the so-called “Lost Generation” and what they’d witnessed by the time 1925 was behind them: the telephone, the radio, the automobile, the airplane, World War I, the Spanish Flu Pandemic, the Roaring ’20s ... That’s a lot! But I think we’ve endured just as much.

Of course, they had more adventures coming in 1929 and 1939 ... I wonder what’s in store for us? **GT**