

GROWERTALKS

Features

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Building Tomorrow's Head Grower

Rayne Gibson



Across the green industry, more and more nursery and greenhouse owners are asking the same question: “Do you know anyone who could be our head grower?”

The short answer is usually no.

It's become one of the most common concerns I hear as a consultant (at least four this year alone). The reality is, there aren't many ready-to-step-in head growers waiting on the sidelines ready to move to your town in the middle of nowhere.

But that doesn't have to be a crisis; it can be an opportunity. The operations that are thriving today aren't the ones waiting for talent to show up; they're building it from within. They've realized that decades of experience sitting in one person's head is too valuable to leave undocumented. Instead of relying on intuition alone, they're turning that intuition into systems, training and structure that let the next generation of growers succeed. When growers share what they know, they build continuity, stability and room for innovation. And when that knowledge is captured in a way others can learn from, it doesn't just stay alive, it grows stronger.

The changing role of the head grower

In every successful operation, the head grower plays a pivotal role. They're not only responsible for the plants, but for the people, processes and decisions that keep the crops on schedule and the business profitable.

For a long time, that role was defined by personal experience, what someone learned through years of observation, trial and instinct. You could walk through the greenhouse and the head grower would just “know” what the plants needed. That level of intuition is powerful, but it's also fragile. It can't easily be handed down unless it's taught and documented. When that person was ready to retire, they would trust that the person who worked under them had learned enough by proxy to take over the reins.

“It's harder and harder to find someone who's horticulture trained,” said Ken Roth, nursery manager at Millican Nurseries. “Our industry's getting bigger and schools are closing their horticulture programs down. So now I look for someone who can learn, adapt and overcome—someone who can problem-solve and show leadership while being dependable.”

The best head growers today understand that leadership means more than knowing how to grow—it means

knowing how to teach growing. When they take time to explain their reasoning, record their methods and guide apprentices, they build resilience into the business.

Turning knowledge into systems

Every operation runs on systems, whether they're written down or not. When growers make decisions based on instinct, those instincts are still systems—they're just invisible ones in your head.

Documenting knowledge isn't about bureaucracy or red tape; it's about visibility. It's a way of saying, "Here's how we succeed and here's how anyone can learn to do it."

Think of it like propagation: If you have a great plant, you take cuttings so you can reproduce it. Capturing grower knowledge works the same way. You're taking cuttings of wisdom, experience and decision-making so that it can be shared, refined and multiplied.

"So much information was leaving out the door and nothing was documented," said Michael Roe of Magnolia Gardens Nursery about their recent turnover. "We were losing knowledge at a breakneck speed."

How to build a grower knowledge system

Every greenhouse and nursery can build a system that captures and teaches its grower knowledge. It doesn't require fancy technology or a consultant on retainer, just consistency and intention.

Step 1: Identify the core knowledge to capture. Start by mapping what the head grower knows that others depend on. Typical categories include:

- Propagation methods from media mix and humidity control to timing for cuttings and transplants
- Irrigation and feeding—how watering schedules adjust by season or plant maturity
- Pest and disease management—how to identify, track and intervene early
- Climate control—balancing light, airflow and temperature for each crop cycle
- Crop timing—scheduling, pinching, trimming, fertilizing and finishing so inventory meets demand
- Labor and workflow—daily task priorities, shift planning and quality checks
- Supplier coordination—preferred materials, vendor relationships and ordering rhythms
- Or more importantly, what goes wrong and how to overcome this

Most of this information already exists; it's just never been written down. The first step is to list it out and decide which parts to document first.

Step 2: Choose the right way to record it. Documentation doesn't need to be complicated. What matters is that it's accessible and used. Some operations keep binders or shared folders that hold SOPs, feeding charts and seasonal notes (don't do this—I'll tell you why in a minute). Others use short smartphone videos where the head grower walks through a process in real time. I've seen teams record five-minute conversations about how they decide when a crop is "ready" and turn those into training clips for new hires.

However, the best methods are easy to record, easy to search, are organized and DIGITAL. Putting these processes in a binder on a shelf seems like a great idea until I ask you for your planting records and you dust off a binders from the top shelf that haven't been updated since 2003 (true story).

Step 3: Make training part of every day work. The most effective training happens during real work because training isn't best served as a theory, rather as a practice. Even the most seasoned growers make mistakes or have unforeseen circumstances pop up that requires wisdom to solve. These are the most powerful experiences for your next grower to be a part of.

- Make “why” be at the center of everything you do. Teaching the why transforms a worker simply doing what they're told into someone gaining knowledge.
- Pair developing growers with the head grower during active production periods. Let them shadow, take notes and gradually take the lead on smaller decisions. Encourage structured discussions—why did we change that irrigation cycle? Why does this variety need different spacing?
- Then use the “teach-back” method. Have the trainee explain the process to someone else. When they can teach it, they truly understand it.

This approach keeps learning continuous, not episodic. Every season becomes a training opportunity. Every change becomes a learning moment.

Step 4: Keep it alive and growing. Documentation should evolve along with the operation. Schedule quarterly reviews to update what's been learned or improved. Invite the head grower to take ownership of the updates. Collaboratively set goals for improvement and record what worked, what didn't and why. This keeps the system accurate and reinforces that it's their legacy being preserved, not replaced.

As the documentation matures, encourage collaboration. Let assistant growers, foremen and seasonal staff contribute notes and insights. Over time, the knowledge system becomes collective, a true representation of how your operation grows, adapts and wins.

Leadership mindset: Building culture through knowledge

The most successful operations I've seen share one defining trait: a culture of growing, building, sharing and teaching. When leadership encourages documentation and training, it sends a message that knowledge is meant to be shared, not guarded. It builds confidence at every level. Team members know they can learn, contribute and grow. Mistakes become lessons instead of setbacks. This kind of culture also makes a business more resilient. If someone leaves or retires, the system doesn't collapse, it adjusts. Everyone understands how things work because everyone helped build the playbook.

It also builds pride. Growers see their work becoming part of something lasting. They're not just managing crops; they're shaping the next generation of growers who will carry forward their standards and improvements.

Start small, build big

The most important part of training your next head grower isn't a policy or a platform, it's the decision to start. Don't overthink it—pick one process this week and document it. Write down how you do it, why you do it that way and what signs you look for to make decisions. That's the seed. From there, the habit grows.

Over time, those small efforts become a full system, a living record of what makes your operation work. It becomes your training tool, your safeguard and your roadmap for the future. When knowledge is shared, everyone grows. When processes are documented, excellence becomes repeatable. And when your head grower becomes a mentor, your business gains something far more valuable than expertise—it gains continuity, creativity and confidence.

So start today. Capture what's in your head and put it where others can learn from it. Build your next head grower by

teaching what made you great. **GT**

Rayne Gibson is owner of Taproots Horticulture Consulting and founder of Next Level Nursery Group.