GROWERTALKS

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Ikigai

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I learned fairly late in life that I like to make things.

No, scratch that—that I need to make things.

I've always liked working with my hands and using my imagination to create something from nothing. Dear old dad, either wisely or foolishly, put tools in my hand at a young age. I vividly recall at age 3 or 4 learning to straighten old nails as he tore down a rotting barn on our New Hampshire property. In his workshop, even as young as 6 or 7, he taught me to use the electric jig saw and drill. A bit later I got into building model cars and planes, and my bedroom smelled of Testor's glue and paint (am I bringing back memories?). Then I discovered skateboarding and built my own from fiberglass and scraps of paneling.

But I never knew how much I enjoyed making stuff until much later in life when I noticed that when I was immersed in a project I would forget all about food, the clock, even the bathroom. Some people call it "flow"—that mental state where you're so absorbed in an activity that time seems to vanish. All I know is, wood, metal, stone, plants—and, yes, words on the computer screen—I'm happiest when creating something.

I also recently discovered that there's a word for this: "ikigai." It's a Japanese term for finding the balance between doing what you love, doing what you're good at, doing what the world needs and—ideally—doing what you can be paid for. Say "icky guy" and you'll have the approximate pronunciation.

Interestingly, I know that many of you find your work in horticulture to be your ikigai. You thrive on the diversity it offers—every day is different, every crop is unique. You enjoy the people, how friendly and open they are, how willing to pitch in and help. You really love the plants; I don't know anyone in horticulture who isn't also a gardener or plant collector. And you love the company you work for, your customers' companies and even—if somewhat begrudgingly—those companies you compete against. I challenge you to find that in any other industry!

Now, I'm sure there are car salesman and accountants and mechanical engineers who love their job enough to call it their ikigai … but somehow I think they're fewer and farther between than in horticulture. Surfers,

sculptures and poets, yeah, they're all about flow … but try making a living surfing or sculpting or finding a word that rhymes with circle.

And yet, here's the odd part: This business is hard! Long hours, in all weather, with spring a vacationless marathon and winter a midnight heater-failure away from total disaster. It tests your stamina and patience. So why do you love it so much? Why are you still here? I think it's because the challenges are part of the attraction. You thrive on overcoming obstacles, winning hard-fought battles, seeing a perfect crop go out the door to a happy customer. And the victories are that much sweeter when they don't come easily.

Also, it helps that there's also no such thing as a pessimistic grower. Realistic, maybe, but still with rose-colored glasses close at hand. Meaning there's always next season.

And that, too, is part of ikigai: It's not about achieving perfection, it's about seeking improvement. As a writer and editor, I love learning new stuff about my craft. For instance, I just learned about the punctuation mark called the "interrobang," which is a question mark and an exclamation mark used at the same time. Crazy, right?!

All the good growers are always seeking information. They love talking shop with other growers, sharing successes and admitting failures with equal enthusiasm.

Which, all in all, makes me feel fortunate I have horticultural journalism to feed my ikigai. And while I'm not sure I buy the "Do what you love and you'll never work a day in your life" stuff (because this IS work), I do know that loving what you do, and doing it with others who love it as much as you do, makes the long days go by just a little bit faster.

Just don't forget to eat. **GT**