

GROWERTALKS

GT in Brief

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In Memoriam: Gary Mangum

Chris Beytes



It was a blow to many in the industry when they heard before Christmas that Gary Mangum, co-founder and former CEO of Bell Nursery in Maryland and a groundbreaker in the modern mass market plant business, passed away unexpectedly on December 15 at his home in Stevensville, Maryland. He was 69 and is survived by his wife of 31 years, Sonia, four children, three grandchildren and three siblings.

Top Left: Gary and his daughter Heather, circa 2012 when she was a merchandising supervisor at their No. 1 Home Depot store. "He's an amazing boss," she said of her dad.

Top right: Gary shares photos of product with Bell District Manager Mary Lou Stransky. Said Mary Lou in 2012 when we featured her in our GrowerTalks article, "[Gary] is really great at sending out motivational emails

... he's really good at saying, 'Thanks for all the hard work, you're doing a great job, hang in there' ... you know, being our cheerleader."

Bottom left: My favorite photo of Gary and Mike, circa early 2000s.

Bottom right: Partners Gary and Mike with then head grower Kathy Popovich (Miller) in that 1997 GrowerTalks article Gary wrote about in his final "Growers Talk Business" column.

Gary was well known for helping develop the in-store service program that's almost ubiquitous today at big box retailers and he was a champion of making pay-by-scan work. He focused Bell exclusively on one big box retailer, Home Depot, a move many considered risky. I once asked him if he was afraid Home Depot would drop him in favor of another grower.

"Chris," he replied. "I want Bell to be so good that Home Depot will be afraid we will drop them!"

Gary was one of our "Growers Talk Business" columnists for 11 years, sharing insights gleaned from his very successful running of Bell Nursery. He would share every detail, believing that a rising tide lifts all boats. He spent

many days mentoring other Home Depot growers with his methods ... but few, if any, could emulate him. Seeing him in action, we recognized why: While most growers know what to do and how to do it, Gary had a third strength: He knew why to do it. When other growers were dropping product on the sidewalk and slipping away under the radar, Gary was sending Monday morning intelligence emails to the store managers and merchants, telling them exactly what was going on—good and bad—in their stores.



And in their stores he was! Almost daily and definitely every weekend, watching shoppers, talking to employees, managers, Bell merchandisers, and especially customers, understanding what was moving and why, and making sure more of it was on the way. If he saw a problem, he was immediately on the phone to get it fixed.

Gary in his element: A Home Depot garden center.

The Bell Nursery story is one *GrowerTalks* followed almost from the beginning. I'd heard about Gary and business partner Mike McCarthy from their Ball Seed rep and paid them a visit in 1996. Impressed, I named them one of our inaugural Top Eight Up-and-Coming Growers for 1997. Gary cited that story in his very last "Growers Talk Business" column in June 2018, writing, "We were definitely rookies, but that particular article really motivated us internally to live up to the kind words and confidence we received at the time."

In the same column, Gary mentioned one of Ball Publishing's GrowerExpo conferences from around 1995 where he heard Peggy Van de Wetering of Ivy Acres speak about the garden center service program they were developing on Long Island.

Wrote Gary, "That session motivated us to accelerate our focus on the service aspect of the Bell business. We first thought we could help Home Depot get our limited products through their cash registers if we helped consolidate them on the sales tables, then we moved to helping with watering."

The rest, of course, is floriculture history: Bell grew into one of the biggest and best wholesale big box growers in the country, copied by many, but rarely matched.

About six weeks before his passing, I messaged Gary about being a guest on a podcast I was thinking about starting. I told him I wanted "to talk about the good old days of building Bell Nursery."



Gary replied, "I'm not sure now is a great time to talk about that, but we should talk, then decide. I've stayed away from putting my nose in Bell business or [making] any comments over all these years."

Gary chatting with Bell's Philadelphia leadership team, circa 2012.

Then he added, "You were sure an important piece of that business growth."

Part of me regrets that I didn't push him to talk on the record just one last time. But another part of me recognized that Gary felt Bell was in good hands with the current leadership and it was no longer his place to speak for the company.

Gary was a pioneer, a leader, a role model and a friend to everyone. He will be sorely missed. **GT**