GROWERTALKS

Inside Look

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A Focus on the Senses

Jennifer Zurko



Every time I walk into a greenhouse, my focus is always on the plants and how the grower is getting them through production and out to the masses. But when I walk into a greenhouse that's under construction, or where only the "bones" have been put up, it forces me to stop and think about all of the other things that are essential for creating the ideal growing environment.

I'll admit that when I'm in a production greenhouse during spring where every bench has something on it, booms are going back and forth, workers are pushing and pulling rackfuls of plants, and baskets are dripping on me from above, I'm greenhouse blind. There's so much around me and so much going on, it becomes one big earthy-smelling hyperbaric chamber of activity and grinding noises. All of my senses are on high alert at the same time. It's funny how it can make you so overstimulated, but also give you the feeling of harmony at the same time. I feel that way in a greenhouse.

My friend Kate Terrell, president of Wallace's Garden Center in Bettendorf, Iowa, has been going through quite the greenhouse journey. Last year, there was a fire in one of the garden center's production areas and headhouse. Thankfully, no one was hurt and it could have been a lot worse if it happened during off hours when nobody's around. But Kate took the setback as an opportunity to upgrade her facility with a new production greenhouse and storage area, complete with a shipping dock for better transport.

When I told Kate I was coming for a visit in early March, she was excited to show me her new growing digs. The bones and "skin" (you call it poly) of the greenhouses were already on and workers were putting up the energy curtains and basket system. The heaters had already been placed and the benching was the next thing to be added.

It's weird seeing a completely empty greenhouse. At first, you think there isn't much to stimulate the senses. But then you get a whiff of that new greenhouse smell and anticipate when it'll be teeming with plants and you get a jump-start of excitement.

Yes, building a new greenhouse can be exciting, but it's also a long, painstaking process to make sure you not only have the right structure for your crops, but also all of the elements that go into it. And in order to do this, you need a good plan.

While I was driving around the cornfields and cows that make up the Iowa landscape, I also stopped by Plantpeddler in Cresco. The Gooder family have a long-established greenhouse and retail business, which continues to see growth since Mike and Rachel started it in 1984. They're no strangers to greenhouse construction projects, with the first phase of their last expansion recently completed. Their philosophy for any major investment is to come up with a master plan that's strategic, thorough and allows room for future upgrades. And they plan it out in increments, with long-term goals separated out in phases. It allows you to ease into such a big project while also giving yourself some breathing room to be flexible. I wrote about how the Gooders approach facility investments for this month's cover story.

As you'll see on the cover and in the photos of the article, Plantpeddler was in full production mode when I was there and I'm grateful that the Gooders took the time during an extremely busy time of year for my brief disruption. After months of a cold, snowy Midwest winter, I realized that some of my senses were hibernating. A noisy, bustling greenhouse filled with young plants was just what they needed to snap out of their slumber. Spring can't get here fast enough.

Here's hoping your spring season is a success! **GT**