GROWERTALKS

Features

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No Lack of Optimism

Edited by Jennifer Zurko



Thankfully, we work in an industry where we not only get a fresh set of optimism every spring (crossing our fingers for good weather), but just in general. The attitude of “it can always be worse” comes with experiencing the highs and lows of being in the greenhouse business. Going through hard times and coming out the other side better and wiser makes sprinkling a dose of optimism with your outlook at the start of every season easier.

As an industry, we’re a hopeful bunch. And for many of us, that started when we were young, fresh-faced professionals just starting out in our careers, optimistic for what the future had in store.

Now that our three Young Grower Award finalists have a few years under their belts, we wondered if they still had that optimism in the tank and how they see it carrying them forward.

For Lindsay Daschner, that optimism means playing a large part in building the future by nurturing younger generations and leading by being flexible and innovative.

Tabitha Samuels Slattery credits the people she’s encountered during her young career who have mentored and guided her through. And she hopes that she can one day pay that forward by inspiring and supporting others.

Michael Wijesinghe looks for optimism in how he’s building his team and collaborating with other industry colleagues, building a community where he can share his passion and purpose.

All three of them told stories of their youth and how horticulture found them. They were bright-eyed for the future then and they’ve carried that through by being open to change and embracing new ways of doing things.

Optimism doesn’t mean your goals are unrealistic or that you see everything through rose-colored glasses—you just need a positive attitude, the willingness to learn and adapt, and some good old-fashioned grit. All of which I think this year’s finalists have in abundance.

Our panel of judges will choose the 2026 *GrowerTalks*/Ball Horticultural Company Young Grower Award winner

based on their nomination applications, their essays and a telephone interview. We'd like to thank our esteemed judges for their time and support of this award. This year's judges are:

Anna Ball
CEO & Chairman of the Board
Ball Horticultural Company
West Chicago, Illinois

Art Parkerson
Owner
Lancaster Farms
Suffolk, Virginia

Patricia Dean
CEO
Wadsworth Control Systems
Arvada, Colorado

Isabela Chamorro
2025 Young Grower Award Winner
Mahoney's Garden Center
Woburn, Massachusetts

Find out who the winner is for our 22nd annual *GrowerTalks*/Ball Horticultural Company Young Grower Award at the Unplugged event during Cultivate'26 in Columbus, Ohio, being held at Gaswerks from 8:00 to 10:00 p.m. on Monday, July 13.

Q. What makes you optimistic about the industry that made you choose horticulture as a career?



Lindsay Daschner
Age: 33
Title: Owner
Operation: Forget Me Not Farms—Ottawa Lake, Michigan

I'm a first-generation farmer. I didn't grow up expecting to farm flowers—honestly, I found them by accident. Or maybe they found me.

Flowers were always present in my life, just not in an obvious way. I grew up in West Toledo, Ohio, where every spring I was drawn to what felt like the biggest, softest pink peonies in the world. (Isn't it funny how everything feels bigger when you're small?) Years later, I learned those La Perle Peonies belonged to my great-grandmother. They'd been divided, moved and replanted over time—quietly carried forward. I remember sitting in the grass, running my hands over the petals, breathing them in. I didn't have the language for it then, but I was experiencing something real: connection, memory and inheritance.

In high school, I found my footing in FFA. I competed in the Nursery & Landscape Career Development Event and became the first female in Ohio to place first individually. I've always had a tendency to push into spaces I'm not expected to be in.

Encouraged by my advisor, I entered the floriculture contest the following year and again placed first, earning scholarships that led me to Michigan State University, where I received my BS degree in horticulture.

At that point, I had a plan. I'd go into landscape design or continue on to a Ph.D. But during the winter break of my senior year, I took a short-term job at a local lily greenhouse just to stay busy. That experience changed everything. I saw how florists sourced flowers and how different they were when they were grown locally. They lasted longer. They meant more. They felt honest. I didn't know cut flowers could be a career until that moment. After two years there, I started Forget Me Not Farms with my beagle, Tater—without a clear roadmap, but with a willingness to figure it out.

This year marks our ninth season. What began as a small operation has grown into half an acre of greenhouse production, 5 acres of field-grown flowers and a full-time team responsible for supplying high-quality, Michigan-grown flowers to our regional market. I've learned a lot in those nine years, but a few things stand out.

First, everything is figure-out-able. I didn't grow up farming; I learned by doing, failing, adjusting and doing it again. Tractors, greenhouse repairs, irrigation systems and team management all came through experience. That willingness to keep going, especially when things don't work the first time, is what separates growers who last from those who don't.

Second, horticulture sits at the intersection of art and science, and cut flowers demand both. Many of the crops we grow—ranunculus, anemones and dahlias—don't come with clear production guides. There's no perfect formula. It requires observation, instinct and a willingness to experiment. I keep detailed records, test varieties and refine systems to build production strategies specific to our climate and market. It's a constant process of improvement that challenges and motivates me each season.

Third, your ability to lead people will determine how far you go. A farm doesn't run on flowers alone; it runs on people who care about the work. My team is my greatest asset and building that team requires intention, consistency and accountability. We're not just growing crops—we're growing individuals who take pride in what they do.

Beyond production, I feel a responsibility to the broader story of American-grown flowers. Many of the varieties we grow today—pansies, sweet peas and heirloom chrysanthemums—were once widely produced in this country, but faded as the industry shifted toward imports and uniformity. Now, we're watching them return.

This is a turning point for American-grown flowers. People are starting to value flowers shaped by season and place, not just bred for durability in transit. Local flowers aren't perfect—and that's exactly the point. They're dynamic, expressive and deeply connected to where they're grown.
They also do something harder to measure: They communicate. Flowers fill the space where words fall short. They show up in moments where language doesn't quite work—grief, celebration, love, apology. And when those flowers are fresh and locally grown, their impact lasts longer. The experience lasts longer. The feeling lasts longer.

In a world where so much of our time is spent behind screens, that matters. People are craving something tangible—something real. Flowers meet that need in a way few other products can.

The shift toward local flowers accelerated during COVID, when supply chain disruptions forced florists to rely more heavily on regional growers. What began as necessity evolved into preference. Florists experienced the quality, freshness and seasonality of locally grown flowers—and many didn't go back. That shift created an opening and it's one we continue to earn through consistent quality, reliable supply, and a reputation growers and florists can depend on.

Looking ahead, I'm optimistic—and I'm committed to helping shape what comes next. The future of this industry depends on growers who are willing to adapt, innovate and lead. For me, that also means investing in the next generation. Through our work with FFA chapters and hands-on mentorship, we're helping young people—especially young women—see themselves in agriculture and step into leadership roles. Supporting that growth is one of the most meaningful parts of what I do.

At its core, this work is about more than growing flowers. It's about building something that lasts—something rooted in place, in people and in purpose. It's about preserving what came before us while creating something new. And, for me, it comes full circle.

I'm still that little girl sitting in the grass, completely captivated by a flower that had been passed down through generations. The difference now is that I understand what it represents—and I have the opportunity to carry it forward.



Tabitha Samuels Slattery
Age: 29
Title: Perennial Grower
Operation: Emerald Coast Growers—Milton, Florida

When I think about my career in horticulture so far, I don't picture the gazillion weeds I've pulled, the countless watering hoses I've untangled, or the pages and pages of scouting notes I've taken—I picture faces. It's ironic, since I went into this field because I thought I preferred the company of plants over humans, but the most meaningful moments of my education and career have revolved around fellow plant people.

In my undergraduate years, I spent many afternoons with my wonderful classmates, studying plant ID flash cards and helping make one another's landscape designs come to life in the school garden (thank you, Christiana and Lydia, for braving that pop-up Florida thunderstorm to help me get my corner of the garden planted!). Even though almost a decade has passed since I received my bachelor's degree, I still stay in touch with many of my fellow Gator alumni to share updates about our lives and careers.

I treasure the memory of the summer I spent interning at a local nursery and produce market. On my breaks from fertilizing hibiscus pots and shelling hull peas, the kind couple who owned the establishment introduced me to their 75-year-old pencil plant cactus and the utter joy of fresh Chilton County peaches. I'm equally grateful for my college job at Ace Hardware and the boss who let me design, launch and manage the garden center section at one of his stores. I spent weeks stacking pallets on cinder blocks to create makeshift tables, rearranging them over and over until I'd created what I thought was the perfect display of impatiens, petunias and bougainvillea for our customers.

Remembering my post-college years, I think of the colleague who saw me in a chemical storage room one day, reading labels and looking befuddled, who handed me a GrowerTalks Insecticide, Miticide & Fungicide Guide that helped me make sense of what I was looking at. I'll also be forever grateful for the experienced coworker who, despite having a million better things to do than walk greenhouses with an over-eager young grower, made time every week for me and my many questions.

Last year, I had the joy of expanding my circle in the industry even more when I started writing for the Growers Talk Production column in *GrowerTalks* magazine. Connecting and corresponding with plant people all across the country has helped me learn so much, not only about the technical aspects of growing perennials, but also about practical topics, such as avoiding burnout, staying informed on industry trends and increasing efficiency in daily operations.

I've been immensely fortunate to have encountered so many good people in my short career, and their presence in this field is what makes me optimistic about my future and the trajectory of the industry as a whole. Horticulture is full of kind, creative folks who are willing to share their insights and enthusiasm without expecting anything in return. Although they come in all shapes, sizes and roles, I believe these people can be sorted into three different "varieties" (to borrow a botany term): mentors, innovators and supporters.

Mentors can be senior employees at private companies, professors at academic institutions, or consultants and freelancers who give advice directly and through books, videos and articles. These can be extension office employees giving local residents input on how to deal with aphids on their tomatoes or USDA soil conservationists educating farmers on best management practices to prevent erosion. No matter what their age, background or profession, mentors take great joy in sharing their wealth of knowledge with others.

Innovators may be doctorate students in the University of Florida's space plants lab, trying to figure out what can be grown in a zero-gravity environment … or they may be production team employees that come up with a more efficient way to divide stock grasses.

Innovators include growers working in restoration horticulture, who experiment with substrates and water levels to replicate a plant's natural environment with the goal of propagating and producing native species for restoration plantings. They include hobby gardeners who turn empty corners of their neighborhood into community gardens to provide a green refuge for their local friends. Sustainability experts (like the Ball sustainability team members who create goals for reducing their company's water usage and carbon footprint) are part of horticulture's innovation crowd as well, even if their roles don't require them to directly handle plants.

Horticulture is full of curious people who want to find answers and make improvements, and the great news is that plants don't discriminate based on education, location or technology—anyone can experiment and discover something worthwhile.

Lastly, horticulture is full of supporters. These are the people who do the essential and unglamorous daily tasks, like taking and sticking cuttings, pulling plants for shipping, and collecting and entering experimental data. Some people are content to find their niche and spend their entire careers in supporting roles. Others, however, may see their time as supporters as a means to an end, a phase that should be rushed through as quickly as possible. While it's healthy to have big future ambitions as mentors and innovators, it's important that we never consider ourselves "too good" to act as supporters, no matter what stage of our career we're in.

Years ago someone asked me a question that's stayed in the back of my mind ever since: "Picture yourself at your retirement party, surrounded by former coworkers giving speeches about you. What do you want them to say?"

I'm hoping when that day comes, I hear plenty of stories about how I was a mentor, an innovator and a supporter for many people in different seasons. As I grow and advance in the workplace, I know I'll have many opportunities to mentor along the way—but I also want to be the person who volunteers to do menial work to support others' successes.

I hope I'm able to be an innovator whose discoveries make people's lives easier and help plants thrive like they're meant to. Most importantly, I want to be one of the "plant people" fondly remembered by many future horticulturalists: someone who patiently answered their questions, encouraged their aspirations and inspired them to grow.



Michael Wijesinghe

Age: 29

Title: Head Grower

Operation: Bell Nursery—Springfield, Ohio

Crisp air flows through the jet-black hair of a young kid as he bounces along an otherwise quiet back road in a red Radio Flyer. The wagon handle, secured by twine to the back of a bicycle, is steered by his brother, breathing heavy, as he continues pedaling forward. Mother's Day is quickly approaching and these two are looking for the perfect gift for their gardening mom. They adventure together to a local garden center and are greeted with not only an abundance of flowers, but also kind warmth and guidance from the employees that makes the experience memorable.

Recalling how inviting the nursery was, a few years later the young bike-riding kid, now 14, returned to that garden center in search of a summer job. Unbeknownst to him, he also found the beginning of his career in horticulture.

During my five years working for Madden Family Farms, I discovered not just a penchant for growing plants, but also the excitement that they bring to people. Growers strive to make it easy for customers to enjoy flowers, but the story behind ornamentals runs much deeper than pretty colors and fragrant smells. To those unfamiliar with the intricacies of the industry, flowers seem unassumingly simple, however, pursuing a career with them is much more complex. Horticulture isn't easy. Growers face a multitude of unexpected challenges every day, including complicated diseases, resilient insects, inclement weather, limited labor, delayed logistics and, of course, many more.

Despite all the troubles, from seed to sale, every part of the green trade is rooted in strong, supportive relationships built by people who are not only skilled, but deeply invested in what they do and in each other. The best growers don't just work with plants—they genuinely love the process, the problem-solving and the quiet victories that come with it. The passionate positivity from people in the horticulture industry made me optimistic about pursuing a career as a greenhouse grower. Years later, that same enthusiasm, regularly radiated from my colleagues, continues to bolster my excitement about the industry.

I redirected my career path shortly after my freshman year of college. I missed working in greenhouses, with plants, and the people that cared for them. My sophomore year, I began pursuing a bachelor's degree in horticulture. I secured a summer internship working with Bell Nursery and immediately felt confident about my decision.

After graduation, I accepted a full-time position as a section grower and trial manager. I was inspired by the level of expertise possessed by everyone from section growers to the director of growing operations. I found a wealth of knowledge and humble individuals eager to share it. Unlike many industries suffused with trade secrets and proprietary information, horticulture thrives on openness and collaboration. Even competitors are willing to share both their failures and successes, all in the name of improving together.

Through our cultivar trials, I worked inter-connectedly with breeders, customers and competitors to identify the best varieties and the cultural practices to produce them. I found the passionate people innate to the industry fostered a system of teaching and learning across all levels, a practice I carried with me. I work diligently to reinforce that in my role today.

When I became the head grower at Bell Nursery's Ohio facility, I inherited a somewhat disoriented grow team. Key knowledge was concentrated in a couple individuals, and while tasks were being completed, there was limited understanding of the "why" behind them. Yet what the team lacked in structure, they made up for with a genuine desire to improve.

Over the past few years, I enjoyed watching my team become both more autonomous and cohesive. I converted the head grower's office into a shared team office and started hosting regular grower meetings. Besides creating an open forum for dialog, I introduced topics like media chemistry, insect scouting and pesticide resistance, with the goal of building both knowledge and understanding.

At first, participation in our meetings was limited, but over time my team began sharing brilliant ideas for increasing quality and improving efficiency. I walk with each of my growers weekly and empower them to develop their own solutions while guiding them to ensure the best chances of success. As we bring their solutions to reality, I ensure they're comfortable using all available tools, from automated irrigation systems and sprayers to biological controls and fertilizer strategies. As their skills developed, so did their sense of ownership. The pride they now take in their crops is evident and it shows in the quality of what we produce.

It's difficult to fully capture what keeps people in the green trades, but it comes down to shared moments of success. Smiles from our scout, who was finding more Orius than thrips because we created a biocontrol program that significantly reduced our pesticide use and allowed native predators to thrive. Excitement from a section grower, who with some coaching on attentive moisture management was able to transition Pythium-riddled calibrachoa to fiery, full, orange baskets of flowers. These moments reflect the care, persistence and passion behind every decision we make.

Beyond the greenhouse, that same passion remains omnipresent. Whether coordinating with biological suppliers to expand our BCA programs, working with lighting partners to improve young plant production or volunteering to moderate webinars with industry experts to share pertinent research, I find a shared commitment to progress. A desire to do better—not just individually, but collectively.

That's what makes me optimistic about the future of horticulture. The challenges are real and they aren't going away. But neither is the passion, the collaboration, nor the drive to grow—not just plants, but people.

More than 20 years ago, a boy walked into a garden center looking for a Mother’s Day gift. What he found was something far greater: a community, a purpose and a lifelong calling. And it’s that same passion—steady, shared and ever-growing—that continues to bring him back, day after day. **GT**