

GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Business

6/30/2026

When Better Isn't Enough

Susie Raker



SUSIE RAKER

The ornamental horticulture industry has spent decades getting exceptionally good at improving plants: Stronger genetics, better disease resistance, longer shelf life, more vibrant color, cleaner production, earlier flowering, better uniformity.

Honestly, at this point, some plants are probably more emotionally stable than the people buying them.

And, yet, despite all of that progress, much of the industry still struggles with the same thing: Convincing consumers to pay more.

That should probably tell us something.

Somewhere along the way, the industry started confusing what we value with what consumers actually value. Growers absolutely value disease resistance. Retailers value consistency. Production teams value efficiency. Those improvements matter because they reduce losses, lower labor, improve predictability and protect margins. But the average consumer wandering into a garden center on a Saturday morning with an iced coffee and absolutely no plan is not evaluating Botrytis resistance. They're asking much simpler questions:

- Do I like this?
- Will it survive me?
- Does it make my space look better?
- Is it worth the price?
- Can I keep it alive without accidentally turning it into mulch by Tuesday?

That disconnect matters more than most people realize because when an industry builds innovation around operational value, but markets products to emotional buyers, commoditization becomes almost inevitable. Consumers don't reward improvements they can't see, understand or emotionally connect to. And when consumers can't distinguish products, retailers can't defend margins. That's the trap.

The ornamental market is already filled with good plants. In fact, most products today are objectively high quality. The baseline across the industry has improved tremendously over the last several decades, which means incremental improvement alone is no longer enough to command attention. A slightly stronger plant is meaningful to production; a slightly stronger plant is often invisible to consumers.

Consumers aren't walking into retail environments saying, "Finally! A petunia with improved fungal resistance under high humidity conditions!"

And this is exactly why so many innovations quietly disappear into the supply chain instead of becoming consumer demand drivers. The industry improves efficiency. Margins tighten anyway. Competition increases. Pricing power weakens. Then everyone starts competing on cost—which is usually the business equivalent of announcing, "We have officially run out of ideas."

The best consumer products in the world requires almost no explanation. Nobody needed a webinar to understand why smartphones mattered. Nobody attended a seminar before buying a Stanley. Consumers instantly understood the value proposition. Yet horticulture still behaves as though the solution to weak demand is more signage, more care instructions and more consumer education. If a product requires a five-minute explanation to justify the price, the market is already narrowing.

Consumers increasingly want the emotional benefits of nature without the emotional commitment of keeping something alive. Modern consumers are busy, distracted, overwhelmed. They aren't looking for another high-maintenance responsibility, which means the real opportunity isn't simply producing better plants. It's producing better consumer experiences.

Plants are no longer competing only with other plants; they're competing with every other thing fighting for consumer attention, discretionary income and emotional energy. That includes entertainment, travel, wellness, technology, home décor, social media—literally everything else consumers could spend money on instead.

And in a world driven by attention scarcity, invisible products lose. That's why visible differentiation matters. And it's also why the future of innovation in ornamentals can't remain entirely behind the scenes.

Science absolutely matters. Genetics matter. Biotechnology matters. But if the outcome of innovation is only operational efficiency, consumers will continue viewing plants as interchangeable commodities.

Congratulations. You built a Ferrari engine for a grocery cart.

The companies that win the next decade will likely be the ones that connect scientific advancement to experiences consumers instantly understand. Not features that require explanation; experiences that create immediate emotional response. That could mean plants that visually communicate water needs, plants integrated into wellness or lighting ecosystems, sensory experiences tied to fragrance or mood. Interactive products consumers actually want to talk about.

Or, yes, maybe even plants that glow in the dark.

The point is not that every plant needs to become a science experiment; it's that consumers need a reason to care. And increasingly, "better genetics" alone isn't enough of a reason.

The ornamental industry is approaching an important decision point: One path continues optimizing internal efficiency while accepting ongoing commoditization and shrinking pricing power. The other focuses on consumer-centric innovation that rebuilds relevance, differentiation and emotional engagement.

That second path requires more creativity, more risk, more discomfort. And probably a few uncomfortable meetings.

But it also creates something the industry desperately needs: Pricing power. Because, in today's market, being technically better isn't always enough. You also have to be noticeable, memorable, socially relevant, emotionally immediate.

The industry keeps engineering better plants while consumers are quietly asking for better experiences. And if we fail to recognize that distinction, we'll continue perfecting products consumers still perceive as interchangeable.

And in business, just like in gardening, being forgettable is usually how things die slowly. **GT**

Susie Raker is Vice President of Raker-Roberta's in Litchfield, Michigan.