

GROWERTALKS

Acres & Acres

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Hard, Even When it's Easy

Chris Beytes



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This public service announcement is for those of you who picked up this magazine accidentally (perhaps from the counter of your local grower/retailer or in a library or from a recycling bin or in an agriculture classroom) and who, having arrived at this page after a thoughtful and interesting read about perennials at CAST and landscape PGRs and diseases on hydrangeas and Trudy Watt's excellent piece on staffing expectations, think that perhaps a career in horticulture sounds like fun!

Well, I'm going to let you in on a secret: It is fun! Tremendous fun!

It's also the hardest job you'll ever have. In fact, as I like to say, "This business is hard even when it's easy."

Here are a few examples why that is so:

Spring is not your own. If you enjoy walking in the woods on a cool April day or weekend puttering around the house in May or Friday afternoon baseball in June, forget it—you'll be working. Whether at a greenhouse or a garden center, your time during spring is not your own. Oh, you'll get a day off ... maybe Monday or Wednesday. Otherwise, it's ship the plants or restock the benches or water, water, water. Wholesale greenhouse employees might get the weekend off ... or they might be in on Saturday to plant the cuttings that arrived late Friday to refill the benches that they emptied on Thursday to ship to their garden center customers. Come July, you can rest ... other than the fall mums that need planting ...

It's hot in here. I hope you like to sweat because you'll sweat plenty in this business. Whether in a hot greenhouse, schlepping plants from the field to the packing shed, unloading truck after truck of peat moss bales or stringing up temporary shade to try to keep the plants cool, you'll be perspiring profusely on most days. This is a two-shower-a-day business. Drink plenty of water.

The best-laid plans ... You're responsible for organizing a festive perennial planting seminar at your garden center. You've arranged for a breeding company expert to present. You've lined up extra plant material, food and beverages, decoration, music, extra staff ... and on the big day it rains in biblical quantities and only eight die-hard gardeners show up, eat all your food and don't buy any plants. Welcome to the plant business, where the best-laid plans are ruined because of factors outside of your control. Just ask our friend Kate Terrell, who had a greenhouse burn down unexpectedly on a busy Saturday in May, shutting her down for four days.

You will have pests. If you have visions of organic gardening, all-natural remedies and holistic, carbon-neutral goodness ... well, just know that insects and diseases LOVE our flowers and plants, and we are nowhere near solving that problem. I guffaw heartily every time I read that greenhouse-grown fruits and veggies are pest-free because they're grown indoors. Have these idiots never grown a houseplant? Bugs LOVE the safety and warmth of the indoors! So, yes, you'll be suiting up (see the section on sweating above) and spraying your plants with something, even if you try your darnedest to stick with biosolutions.

Success doesn't guarantee success. What I mean is, you can have an absolutely amazing spring one year and an absolutely dismal spring the next, giving back all your profits. It makes planning challenging—both for next season and for retirement. As I mentioned in the planning section, you can plan to be 10% up this year and you can plan to that plan ... but it doesn't guarantee you'll sell all those plants at the dollar figure you hoped for and make your plan. As I also like to say, "You don't make money growing plants. You make money selling plants."

It gets in your blood. My biggest warning to you: If you dip your toe in only slightly, if you take just a little dabble in the form of a part-time job, if you grow 100 hosta in your backyard and sell them, you'll become addicted to horticulture. There's something about this business—the sight of the blooms, the earthy aroma of potting soil, the rich oxygenated air of a greenhouse. And the people! The smiles, the friendships, the hearty laughs, the firm handshakes ... it all gets deep into your soul, wrapping its tendrils around you like a jasmine on a trellis. That's why we say this industry isn't a job, it's a lifestyle.

Thankfully, it's also what makes the hard stuff seem not quite so bad after all. **GT**