

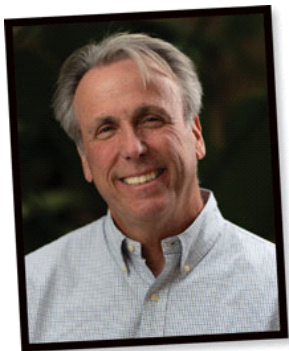
GROWERTALKS

Acres & Acres

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Eight Things I Can Guarantee*

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I may regret writing this column, but after more than 40 years in horticulture—with much of that spent as an observer, analyst and pundit rather than actually having to work for a living—I can confidently say that there are a few self-evident truths in horticulture. They were true when George J. Ball launched the magazine in 1937, they were true when I was a grower in the 1980s, they are true today and they will be true in 2037.

1. You need to invest in efficiency. Costs are going up—especially labor.

Nineteen states already have a \$15-or-higher minimum wage. Three more are set to be there by 2028. Of course, almost nobody pays minimum wage, not if you want to find good help, so just assume payroll will continue to outpace the price of your plants. George and his boys were preaching efficiency back in the 1940s! Which is why ...

2. You need to know your true production costs. If you're still guestimating your costs, then this must still be a hobby. Real businesspeople know their costs to the penny on every item in the greenhouse. It doesn't mean they make top dollar on every item, but it does mean they know which ones carry the load and which ones keep certain customers happy, which ones are keepers and which ones they can drop. There's so much good information out there now, including past *GrowerTalks* articles by Bill Swanekamp, that you have no excuse. Let AI help!

3. Today is the cheapest day to do anything. I've learned this one personally, especially since the pandemic, having built a house, pool and barn in Florida, first wondering how in the world I was going to afford it and now grateful I did it when I could still afford it. If you're waiting for something to get cheaper before investing in it, you'll have a long, long wait. Think back to past investments you've made in land, structures or equipment—do you regret any of them? Probably not. As the song says, these are the good old days.

4. You don't make money growing plants, you make money SELLING plants. The first truth I figured out and the first saying I coined. Yes, you have to invest in efficient growing and have a top-quality crop to sell. But if you don't invest equally in your sales and marketing team and strategy, you'll eventually find a padlock on your front door.

5. Bad times are good for us. Since I closed my own greenhouse in 1991 (in a recession), I've watched this industry survive the dot.com crisis, the 9/11 attacks, the 2007 housing crisis and Great Recession, and COVID-19, and with some exceptions (woodies in the housing crisis and cuts during the pandemic), our industry has been fairly

unscathed. That's not to say today's tariff and diesel situations aren't a big challenge. But, overall, hard financial times seem to keep people close to home and feeling sorry for themselves—the perfect time to buy plants!

6. Bad weather is bad for us. THIS is what we should be trying to fix: rainy weekends in spring. Yes, with more people working from home, weekdays have become viable garden-shopping days. But, generally speaking, we want sunny, dry weekends in April, May and June when folks are most likely to be thinking about our stuff to maximize revenue. As a hedge, growers can ship to multiple regions and retailers can install covered shopping.

Historically speaking, the pandemic has been the only time in recorded history when weather didn't seem to matter at all ... but I don't think you'd trade another pandemic for a few more sales.

7. Your customers (and employees) will change. Since the Baby Boomer generation (79 million at its peak), generation sizes have been shrinking—65 million for Gen X, 72 million for Millennials, 68 million for Gen Z, and Gen Alpha and Gen Beta getting smaller still. The only thing that will reverse that trend is immigration. Meaning your customers and your employees will change. Your competitors, too. The whole complexion of our industry will evolve—literally.

8. People will always want plants. Of that I am 100% certain. But there are variables: Which plants? How many? In what sizes/shapes/configurations? For what purpose or occasion? (See #7 above.) Which leads to one more thing that will never change: The fun and the challenge of trying to figure out what consumers want. **GT**

**Not really—the only guarantees in life are death and taxes.*