

LiveTrends buys Plant Marketing, the potential vanilla market and a new book



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LiveTrends Buys Plant Marketing

You may have heard from Chris Beytes' *Acres Online* that LiveTrends recently bought the 20-acre, Mt. Dora, Florida-based foliage nursery. If you didn't, I'm going to include that e-newsletter's highlights here—Chris did his usual top-notch job on the write-up—then I will follow up with a few additional notes from my own interview with LiveTrends' Bisser Georgiev. Oh, one note before jumping into his report: The nursery will be renamed The Urban Jungle Group and it will be a separate entity from LiveTrends.

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“We wanted to secure at least a small part of our supply chain,” answered the LiveTrends founder when asked why the innovative design and marketing company would decide to get into production—something Bisser had long sworn he would not do. “We believe in outsourcing. We have 25 contract growers around the country, it’s working great, and those people will stay in place. But with the booming of the indoor houseplant trend happening out there, we felt like we needed to jump in.” Bisser says his goal is ‘to create a really attractive, very innovative line of new houseplants.’

“The first order of business: Rebranding as The Urban Jungle, with the tagline ‘Plants for Modern Living.’ (Former owner Larry Reit will keep the Plant Marketing name for his Eau Claire, Wisconsin, nursery, which is not part of the sale.) They’ll add more trendy foliage varieties to The Urban Jungle’s mix, a portion of which will go to LiveTrends for upgrading and selling under the new brand’s name, with the rest sold unbranded (for now) to Plant Marketing’s existing customer base of groceries, independents, brokers and such. LiveTrends will then add infrastructure, technology and marketing to the new venture. Eventually, Bisser sees The Urban Jungle having its own ecommerce presence, too. But at the same time, he says they’ll keep the ‘competitive price nature’ of their line of basic foliage plants.

Bisser’s view of the current shortage of indoor foliage is that it’s not based on too much demand and too little supply. Instead, ‘It is always based on what plants are in demand right now. Like pilea two years ago, or monstera now. [Certain plants] have become trendy really fast, and growers don’t have time to react—it’s a slow industry. With The Urban Jungle, my goal is to use the same trend forecasting system that we use for LiveTrends, but apply it to the horticulture end, and predict what is going to be trendy two years from now, and react to that before anybody else does.’”



“But It’s Fun”

Of the company, Bisser said Plant Marketing is one of the highest quality premium foliage suppliers out there and that they’ve been flying under the radar for 20 or more years. As Chris’ interview mentioned, LiveTrends wants to apply their system of trend forecasting—which helps to predict what will be in demand 18-24 months out. “What works is real analysis and real trend forecasting,” Bisser explained over the phone. “With LiveTrends, we pay a lot of money for consultants in Italy, Amsterdam, London and New York to help us predict what’s coming up next in fashion, in society, in culture ... So we’ll try to use the same intellectual network to help us determine what is the next thing that’s going to hit the indoor houseplant market.”

They don’t have any plans to add new varieties to the product mix for now, and will of course honor all current orders and contracts. They’re not even changing the 60-some employees at the nursery. They may add some trending varieties in 2020, and since the property is a total of 40 acres, they may consider adding some production space, too.

I asked Bisser if he had any other operations on his shopping list and I received an emphatic "not at the moment." After all, LiveTrends did just being operating in India in the past year—including building a handful of production facilities—and is on track for heading into the South Korean and Japanese markets in the next little while.

Coming back to this market, Bisser explained that they've fine-tuned the company vision for both LiveTrends and The Urban Jungle. "Our thing now is to fuse nature with culture, and that covers all areas," he said. "If you look at this with LiveTrends, we don't exactly create museum art or super-expensive home décor. We merge nature with culture and how this thing changes with time. And all this is based on future trend forecasting, research and innovation. [This will be our] guiding light across all categories and all our companies that we build in the future."

They'll be debuting the new The Urban Jungle brand at the International Floral Expo in Miami in June, as now is the time to hammer out deals for 2020. When I suggested he sure must be busy, Bisser kind of laughed and said, "We're busy, but it's fun."



Your Future Might Include ...

I'm stealing a segment header from one of my favorite daily e-newsletters (While You Were Working) to share the news that your future might include vanilla beans grown in Florida. Or if you live in Florida, your future might include you yourself growing the orchids that produce vanilla beans. Wouldn't that be cool?

I ran across a news item out of Florida about the work of Dr. Alan Chambers, an assistant professor in Tropical Plant Breeding out of the University of Florida IFAS. He and a group of folks are working in Homestead, Florida, to see if native vanilla-producing orchids could eventually be grown, harvested and processed right there in southern Florida.

According to Alan, the conditions are pretty good for it: They've got cultivars they could use, a climate that could grow it and, most importantly, growers interested in growing it.

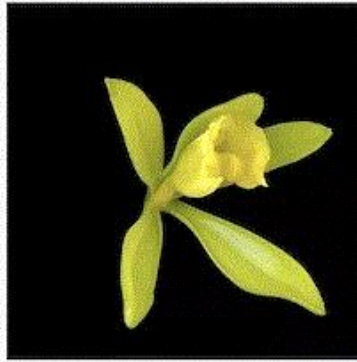
It may come as no surprise that, even though the U.S. is the world's biggest importer of vanilla beans, much of the vanilla-flavored stuff we eat is flavored with vanillin, which isn't derived from a vanilla-producing plant.

Alan says that Florida's native (and rare) vanilla orchids are reportedly resistant to the biggest pathogen in the commercial vanilla trade. The team is working on seeing if this is a trait they can hybridize into commercial varieties. Exciting stuff!

I reached out to Alan for a bit more information about the possibility of horticultural types like you folks growing orchids for flavor rather than for floral purposes. Here's what he had to report:

- Vanilla is easy to propagate by cuttings in a greenhouse or screenhouse.
- Growing concerns are temps (not freezing, for sure), filtered light and appropriate soil moisture.
- It can be grown in shadehouses or under an existing fruit tree crop as long as there's shade.

Sounds right up our alley—it is an orchid after all—but is it profitable? "I don't have the data on profitability yet, but we think this crop has potential, especially as a secondary crop." Alan says cured beans are going for about \$550/kg (about the harvest from two to four plants) on the international market.



Vanilla - the world's favorite flavor

If you're going to pick up the phone or email Alan to find out more, he's currently touring vanilla operations in Madagascar without access to email for a week or two. He suggests visiting his [WEBSITE](#) to learn more. There's a new vanilla growing guide on it if you want to see if you're up to the task.

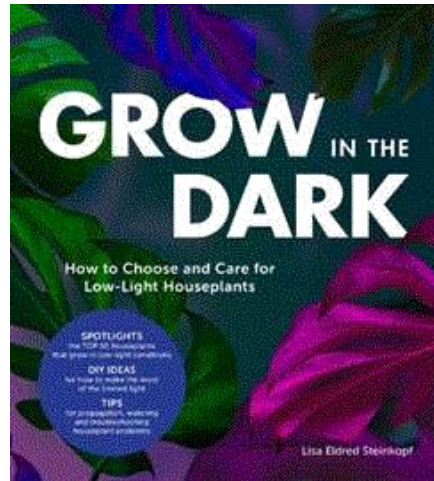
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Grow In the Dark

I have a brand-new houseplant-centric book for you that is available beginning today! It's called "Grow in the Dark: How to Choose and Care for Low-Light Houseplants" and is written by houseplant expert and author Lisa Eldred-Steinkopf.

You're saying, "What, another houseplant book? How is this one different?" It's different because it focuses on the best 50 houseplants for dim and dark apartments with low to little light. Not every room in today's living units (think condo buildings, for instance) have a window. I have two bathrooms and nary a window in either! But it sure would be nice to have some sort of real plants in those spaces. "Grow in the Dark" can help me and other low-light lovers find what can handle the conditions.



The book offers detailed profiles on each plant as well as tips for watering, potting, troubleshooting pests and diseases and which are safe for pets. A home's lush greenery just expanded from the well-lit windows to all the corners of the house. Available via Quarto Publishing.

Suggestions, comments, questions or news to share? Just drop me a line at ewells@ballpublishing.com.

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