

The "Plantdemic"; Art on Payroll; Mark on Freight



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## COMING UP THIS WEEK:

On the term "plantdemic"  
Art, on holding labor costs  
Peat sustainability webinar  
A retail/grower on freight  
Some excellent social media  
7 tips for keeping customers  
Penn State online courses  
AH expands advocacy  
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## “Plantdemic”: A brief history of the term

"Plantdemic"—a clever word! And one I heard for the first time this week. Is it a newly minted term? Or have folks been using it and I simply haven't been paying attention. But it's hard to imagine that ...

Anyway, being the hard-hitting investigative journalist I am, I set out on a Google exploration to learn the history of the word. Here's what I found:

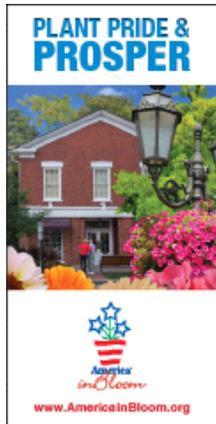
The first reference I found was dated September 1, 2020, on the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* website, where the term was used thusly:

*A gardening craze dubbed "plantdemic" has spread across the Philippines after coronavirus restrictions fueled demand for greenery, sending plant prices soaring and sparking a rise in poaching from public parks and protected forests.*

Who did the dubbing? Amor Alcantara, owner of the garden store "Ms. Potts and Plants" in Rizal. Said the story:

*The craze for botanical ornaments has been so intense that last month, P9,000 (\$178) worth of dwarf anthuriums were stolen from Alcantara's garage. The incident has been caught on closed-circuit television.*

*"For me, it's like having a 'plantdemic,'" she said.*



Digging further, I found a plant company called Plantdemic LLC that was incorporated on September 17, 2020. Owners Stasha Welker and Jennifer Recker started selling plants from a “small, licenced front yard nursery” in New Braunfels, Texas. On September 30, they created their [Facebook page](#) of that same name. (Ironically, another PlantDemic online store, in the Philippines, started its Facebook page exactly one year later, September 17, 2021.)

Then I found a small (two-person?) organization called [Plantdemic](#) in Canada. It’s a group dedicated to showing how the treatment of animals relates to human disease—zoonotic diseases, as it’s called. While I have no specific starting date for them, they did speak at an online conference organized by Vegan Option Canada on August 30, 2020. However, they weren’t referenced as “Plantdemic” in that conference, so perhaps that name came later. (One of the co-founders is an actor and stuntman.)

Slightly earlier than that, Amy Gangi, founder of [Leaf Me Alone Plant Club](#) (which she calls “the littlest plant shop in Charleston, South Carolina), on August 17 wrote a blog post titled [“Surviving the plantdemic.”](#)



## The history of the “Plantdemic,” continued

Warming to my work, and up to about page three or four of my Google search, I came across this June 8, 2020 headline from the [Aurora \(Colorado\) Sentinel](#):

*Plantdemic: Horticulture indoor and out takes root in a city under quarantine*

The short story opens like this:

*Houseplants have had an Instagram-worthy glow-up in the last few years. Once a hobby, owning plants is now trendy with some social media influencers dedicating their entire online presence to their leafy friends. A study earlier this year revealed seven-in-10 Millennials consider themselves “plant parents.”*

*But perhaps, in light of a global pandemic, being a so-called plant parent, however annoying the term, can offer some reprieve from a 24-hour bad news cycle that never seems to ease up and offer a bonus lesson in survival.*

Staff writer Kara Mason penned the story, but didn’t use that term in her article. Newspaper staff writers don’t often write headlines (at least they didn’t in my day), so it could be an unsung copyeditor who came up with it.

That was June 8. However, three days earlier, on June 5, a company called Tabletopia launched a

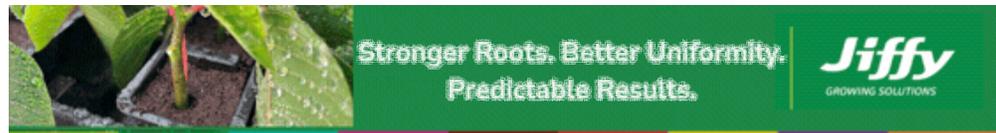


game called **Plant-Demic**, described as, “You and your team are the last defense standing in the way of an invasive species that threatens the world!” It was designed by students at Arroyo Valley High School in San Bernadino, California.

That being the earliest reference to the term that I can find, I’m giving those kids credit with coining the term—even if it is hyphenated.

As an aside, there’s a strain of cannabis called Plantdemic Shake Special. And on Soundcloud, you can listen to a song called **Plantdemic Psychedelic Mix**, by Acid Bubble.

And now you know much more than you care to about the term “plantdemic.” Feel free to use it for your own purposes; nobody’s trademarked it—yet!



## Art, on a way to hold the line on payroll

Last time, I promised you this tip from Art VanWingerden of Metrolina Greenhouses about how his employees are now helping the nursery hold the line on payroll. I was speaking with Art on the topic of automatic cutting stickers for the November issue of *GrowerTalks*, and the subject of labor and wages came up. Art offhandedly mentioned that they’re doing a new program where they told their employees that if they kept labor costs under a certain percentage of the total costs, everybody would get a \$1 an hour raise.

“We’re doing more work with less people,” Art said of the results. “It’s been a very good incentive to give to people.”

Wait, what? Tell me more! Folks are going to want to know about this.

Explained Art, they told the staff that if the company could hold its labor costs—payroll only, not including taxes or benefits, healthcare, pensions or other labor expenses—to a percentage of the total overhead, every employee would get a \$1 an hour raise. And that’s on top of the regular merit raises they’d normally give for tenure, promotions, cost of living and the like.

“Our average person is getting a \$1.75 raise,” Art says.

How does this work to control Metrolina’s labor costs? Art offered two examples.

“Our shipping crews used to have nine people on them. We have six on our shipping crews now. We used to have 22 people per production line. We’re down to only 16 per production line.”

Art credits a combination of H-2A workers and experienced employees, meaning they have fewer new employees who don’t know the jobs and are slower. Also, crew leaders, who used to say, “Sure, send me a couple of extra people” are now thinking, “How can I do it with fewer people?”

Why does it work?

“You’re incentivizing the right work ethic,” he says. “That’s what we’re trying to do, get people to get more done.”

The program works well enough that they’ll keep offering the same \$1 raise every year, as long as they stay under the desired percentage (which Art wouldn’t share publicly).

“I don’t care if we’re at \$25 an hour in 10 years. If we can do it for under X percent, then I know I can make money.”



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## Peat and sustainability webinar—sign up now!

Tune in Wednesday, October 27, at 1:00 p.m. Eastern/Noon Central if you want to learn more about peat moss, and its future and sustainability as a potting medium.

Peat is a hot and sometimes controversial topic, but that's mostly because people don't understand the inner workings of peat bog management. You can arm yourself with the facts by listening to Susan Parent of Premier Tech Horticulture. With more than 35 years at Premier Tech, Susan has many years of knowledge and experience in the peat moss industry in Canada, including sphagnum peat moss harvesting, processing, and most importantly, the restoration of valuable peat bog resources.

In this webinar, Susan will explain all the details of today's sphagnum peat moss industry, including how harvest sites are restored, and the sustainability and outlook of this valuable resource for future generations of growers and gardeners.

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## A retail grower on real-world freight cost issues

Long-time reader Mark Landa of [Boulevard Flower Gardens](#) in South Chesterfield, Virginia, wrote in this week to tell me about how my discussion of ongoing freight cost problems hit home with him this fall. Wrote Mark:

*We do a good amount of pumpkins, as we have had an established patch with lots of activities for families for about 35 years now. The pandemic has been hard, as we could not do a lot of extra activities that involved close contact among children. Despite that, we have still had an extraordinary season. Our customers have been great, coming out in big numbers for some good photo ops and family fun.*

*When I saw what you wrote about freight issues, I just wanted to share how it affected us, as well as many others, I am sure. We do about five trailer loads of assorted pumpkin types, gourds, etc. each season. We will pull pumpkins in from growers we have used for years and can really trust. We are in central Virginia and haul pumpkins from Virginia (western part of the state), North Carolina and Pennsylvania.*

*Our first load of pumpkins out of North Carolina was \$800 freight and the grower paid it because of the amount of volume we do with him. Shortly after that, we got an email from him that due to the increase in the price of freight, he could not pay it anymore. He adjusted the price of the pumpkins slightly and we would take care of the freight.*

*Second load came and the trucker handed us a bill for \$1,500 freight. I just could not believe it! The price of pumpkins went down \$10 a bin and freight went up \$30 a bin, which costs us over \$1,000 per load. It has yet to change and will do nothing but go up at this point.*



*We buy fraser fir Christmas trees from the same grower and the freight company told us to expect \$1,800 per load for them. What is crazy about this is that the trees have had double-digit increases for the last three years. Some growers are 40% higher than they were just three years ago. The demand is still good and the supply is still terrible. It is really hard if you are a new customer to get any of these good growers to even sell you a tree.*

*It does not take a mathematician to figure out that, given a 40% increase in tree prices and a 120% increase in freight costs, where the price of the tree has to go to. I don't know how our*

*customers don't go into shock when they see the prices that we have to charge for good trees. It is really a big challenge for garden centers now with the price increases overall and the increase in wages and shortage of help.*

But, of course, Mark, like every other horticulturist I know, has a positive attitude, and he concluded, "Some way we will pull through, though, and be resilient."

Let's just hope our end consumers are equally resilient when it comes to their pocketbooks, Mark!

Got a story on crazy freight or maybe some good news you want to share? Email me at [beytes@growertalks.com](mailto:beytes@growertalks.com).

## **Boulevard's excellent social posts**

I haven't written much about social media of late, but while browsing [Boulevard's Facebook page](#) for a photo of their pumpkins, I noticed their posts were more compelling than what I usually see from a garden center, and 10 minutes later I was still skimming and reading. Some were about products and sales, but quite a few showed purchases by customers and thanked those customer for the business. Another was in support of a cat rescue fund.



Credit goes to Mark's youngest daughter Casey, whom he calls "the mastermind" of social media. Casey and her sister, Madison, took over the business in 2018.

Check it out—you might get some ideas for your own social media posts!

### **“Seven Tips to Keep America’s New Green Thumbs Green”**

That is the title of a piece I saw in the latest issue of *Southwest Horticulture* (the official publication of the Arizona Nursery Association). It was authored by a fellow named Brian Kunnari, founder of Right/Left Consulting & Design. Brian's bio says he "is the son of a lifelong nurseryman who has spent his career in marketing, advertising and communications," which I'd like to think gives Brian some credibility when it comes to telling us how we might convince those new gardeners to keep coming back for more of what we offer. Here are Brian's seven tips, condensed. (To read his full piece, click the link at the end.)

### Tip 1: Don't think of your nursery as a retail shop, but as an answer center

"Turn your nursery into the easiest stop of their week concerning all things gardening," Brian suggests. "Change up your displays so that you create a perfect all-in-one spot for your new home gardeners. Containers, tools, small supplies should all be within arm's reach and together. Also, make sure you have clear signage with easy descriptions so they can read, grab and go."

### Tip 2: Ask, listen, respond

"By asking questions about how things are going, what they struggle with or what would make their gardening easier, you are gaining valuable insights into what you need to offer. Then take those insights and turn them into actions."

### Tip 3: Be consistent with advice on your social media

"No matter the platform, use your social platforms to share gardening tips and tricks. Keep this new market from blindly doing a Google search and let that advice come from you."

**SEVEN TIPS TO KEEP AMERICA'S NEW GREEN THUMBS GREEN**  
by Brian Kantor, Right (Left Consulting & Design / Founder/Principal Strategist)

**TIP 1: BE CONSISTENT WITH ADVICE ON YOUR SOCIAL MEDIA**  
No matter the platform, use your social platforms to share gardening tips and tricks. Keep this new market from blindly doing a Google search and let that advice come from you.

**TIP 2: SHARE CONTENT ON YOUR PAGE**  
Not everything has to be from scratch. You can easily share an article from another source or grab a quote you read from somewhere else online and give them the credit.

**TIP 3: SIMPLICITY IS KING**  
Keep your tips simple. If you share or post a how-to video, keep the description short.

**TIP 4: BE CREATIVE**  
Just like the home industry, landscape and gardening are creative interests and hobbies. Appeal to that newfound creativity in this market and don't hold back! Help them to realize they can decorate, paint and add their personality to what they have created with their garden.

**TIP 5: ASK, LISTEN, RESPOND**  
By asking questions about how things are going, what they struggle with or what would make their gardening easier, you are gaining valuable insights into what you need to offer. Then take those insights and turn them into actions.

**TIP 6: BE EMOTIONAL**  
The best advice from a marketing perspective is humans react to emotion. No matter the product, no matter the industry, if you can make what you sell emotional, your retention rates will be through the roof, and so will your sales.

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"The best advice from a marketing perspective is humans react to emotion. No matter the product, no matter the industry, if you can make what you sell emotional, your retention rates will be through the roof, and so will your sales."

To read the whole article, click [HERE](#) or on the photo above.

## Penn State to offer online landscaper courses

Looks like Penn State Extension has come up with a winner with its two new online courses, “Plant Identification and Usage: Coniferous Trees” and “Weed Management for Ornamental Landscapes.” They say they’re suited for landscapers, horticulture professionals and even avid gardeners. They’ll be great for training landscape crews and garden center staff in some basics of landscape ID and maintenance. Admittedly, they’re aimed toward those working and gardening in the Northeast, but I’m sure there’s plenty of crossover with the Midwest and other temperate regions.

In “**Plant Identification and Usage: Coniferous Trees,**” you’ll learn the identification features of 35 common coniferous trees of the Northeast, the cultural requirements of coniferous trees, common insect and disease problems, basic pruning requirements and timing, and how to select coniferous trees for the landscape.



*Abies fraseri* (Fraser’s fir). Photo credit: Michael Masiuk, Penn State.

In “**Weed Management for Ornamental Landscapes,**” you’ll learn how to identify common weeds in the Northeast, describe weed classification, reproduction and plant life cycles. The course also covers the harmful effects of undesired plants on humans, other plants, animals and the environment. It helps participants understand integrated weed management systems and why invasive weeds are essential to control. The course also covers proper herbicide use and safety—from application to disposal—along with the methods and equipment landscape professionals use to apply herbicides effectively.

Both courses qualify for Pennsylvania Certified Horticulturist (PCH) continuing education units (CEUs).

More information and registration for these two new online courses, as well as Penn State Extension’s library of Green Industry Professional Development Courses, can be found [HERE](#).

These courses are supported by the generous contributions of the Pennsylvania Landscape and Nursery Association.

## AmericanHort expands advocacy reach

AmericanHort continues to invest in the resources and capabilities needed to address the key advocacy issues important to you—the horticultural businessperson.

To that end, they've hired **Evan Lee** as Director – Policy and Government Relations. Evan most recently served as Chief of Staff for the Office of Congressional Relations, USDA, acting as the principal deputy for the Assistant Secretary for Congressional Relations. Prior to that, he was Legislative Director for Congressman Neal P. Dunn, M.D. (FL-02) and Legislative Assistant for Congressman Daniel Webster (FL-10). In these roles, he led policy and legislative programs in agriculture, labor, energy and environmental issues.

Recognizing his growing impact on association priorities of transportation, infrastructure and tax, among other key issues, **Tal Coley** has been promoted to Senior Director – Advocacy and Government Affairs. In his tenure at AmericanHort he has led successful issue campaigns that have created significant value for our industry and help expand the association's advocacy reach across the industry.

Last, but hardly least, **Craig Regelbrugge** has been promoted to Executive Vice President – Advocacy, Research and Industry Relations, recognizing Craig's unparalleled contributions to AmericanHort and our industry. While Craig's key focus areas continue to be labor, workforce and immigration policy, as well as plant health and trade, he's an industry leader with expertise on just about every other legislative and regulatory issue affecting our industry. Craig will focus more time on strategic advocacy programs and assisting to solve member issues.

To learn more about AmericanHort and the association's advocacy work, visit [AmericanHort.org/Advocacy](https://AmericanHort.org/Advocacy).

## Finally ...



Photo by Cliff Franks, Buckeye Drone.

The 31st annual Barberton (Ohio) Mum Festival took place September 25-26 and it's nice to see the home of mum pioneer Yoder Brothers is still celebrating the iconic fall plant. My long-time friend Bob Humm (he was my Yoder Brothers sales rep when I was a potted mum grower in Florida) made it on [THIS](#) local news report, talking about mums and Yoder. He's been volunteering his time for the Mum Festival for decades.

See you next time!



**Chris Beytes**  
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