

2025: The Year in Rearview



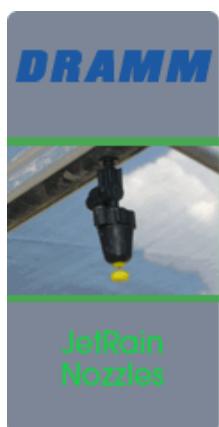
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TUESDAY, DECEMBER 30, 2025

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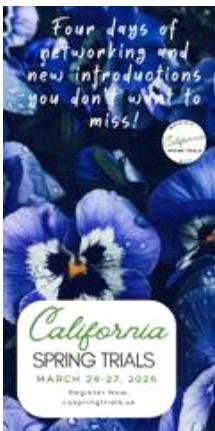
News and Commentary from GrowerTalks Magazine

COMING UP THIS WEEK:

A month-by-month recap of 2025



2025: The Year in Rearview



Since the time around Christmas and New Year's Day is generally pretty slow, news-wise (which is how we all like it!), I have adopted the tradition of recapping the year's events for you—the big news of each month, how spring went, mergers & acquisitions, passings, and random occurrences I find interesting. It's a bit like when I used to do the Police Beat for the *Brevard Reporter* weekly newspaper: I had as much fun with the wacky crimes as I did with the serious ones—maybe more. Let's dive in!

January

I reported on my annual trips to TPIE in Fort Lauderdale and IPM Essen in Germany. I got excited meeting several first-time exhibitors at TPIE, including a young couple from Las Vegas who'd invented a pot with a slide-out saucer drawer for easy emptying. I also met Jacqueline Costa, daughter of Mike Costa and a cousin of the Costa Farms Costas, who was exhibiting her new boutique business, The Farmer's Daughter. I commented that she might just be the next Martha Stewart! It's always exciting to see new blood and the next generation choosing our industry as their own.



But I also reported some sad news with the passing of Nick Van Wingerden, one of the original 15 children of Aart and Cora Van Wingerden, at the age of 71. Nick was the founder and former owner of Mid-America Growers in Illinois and one of the first "mega-grower" greenhouses in the country, as his nephew Abe called it.

Lastly, the merging of two big names in Automation: TTA and ISO Horti, who decided to cooperate rather than compete in the field of greenhouse automation, especially the new class of

cutting stickers.



February

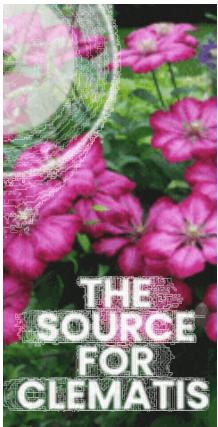
Scanning the subject lines of the four February newsletters, I see that Georgia-based Rambo Nursery was set to close, according to a WARN filing. Sam Rambo sold the business to Andrew Heaner in 2021. I reported that Sam was suing Mr. Heaner for lack of payment, but I don't know how that case was settled.

Another business facing a challenge was Everde, which filed Chapter 11 due to "months of various operational and liquid-related challenges." Everde used to be known as TreeTown USA. However, they emerged from bankruptcy a few months later in May after being acquired by TYFCO LLC, a new entity formed by Jonathan Saperstein, the CEO of Everde, plus some partners.

And another passing in February of well-known Oregon retailer Jack Bigej, owner of Al's Garden & Home. Jack started the business in an abandoned chicken coop at his father's roadside fruit stand, growing it over the decades into a four-location, multi-million dollar business.

Lastly, I visited the coolest new plant show going, PlantCon, a show so unusual, the first





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exhibitor I saw was a tattoo artist. The Orlando show was their first outside of Texas, where founder Kenny Nguyen, a 30-year-old laid-off architect, started the show. For 2026, they'll be in Los Angeles, Houston (twice), Dallas and New York.



NEW FOR 2026

PW PROVEN WINNERS

March

In March, I announced the winners of the inaugural Cultivating Excellence Awards (CEAs), hosted by our publication *Inside Grower* in partnership with Indoor Ag-Con. The winners are:

Operational Excellence—Little Leaf Farms

Good Stewardship—80 Acres Farms

Product Innovation—CE-Line, offered through Dramm

I love telling the stories of the next generation of horticulturists. Like Rudy Klaver, son of Ko Klaver of Zabo Plant and Lily Looks, who'd gone to Alaska for a summer job at the peony farm Boreal Peonies with his friend Eli. Next thing you know, the pair had leased the farm and were running it! Some summer adventure, eh?





And speaking of Lily Looks, they announced the introduction of Miracle, the first new Easter lily in ... well, perhaps a generation or more. The breeding goals are easy production, uniformity and a clean, healthy bulb that can be finished at a profit for the grower. Watch out, Nellie White!

Oh, I almost forgot CAST—the California Spring Trials—but that's because I cover it in a different newsletter. But I spent a lovely week in California with my colleagues Jen, Bill and Osvaldo, looking at flowers, eating good food and drinking good wine, and writing until 11:00 p.m. most nights. Grueling, but fun!



April

April saw the start of my annual Spring Weekend Sales Survey and your scores were above average the first week, “pretty dismal” the second week, “below average, doggone it!” the third week, “10 and 7” for Easter—meaning either perfect or blah for most of you—and finally “above average” for the last weekend of April. In other words, a rollercoaster of a month! As always, the weather was the culprit—horrible rain across the southeast and winter still hanging on up north. But at least customers were buying when the conditions were right for them to buy.

Another acquisition to report, this time of N.G. Heimos Greenhouses by the Hoffmann Family of Companies, which we'd come to know through their earlier acquisition of American Farms in 2022. It's a Naples, Florida, investment firm owned by billionaire David Hoffmann and his sons Geoff and Greg, with interests in a wide range of fields, including golf courses, wineries, aviation, transportation, marine, hospitality and more.

In the same newsletter of April 11, I wrote about the closing of Welby Gardens in Colorado and the sale of 99-year-old Schaefer's Greenhouse in Illinois.

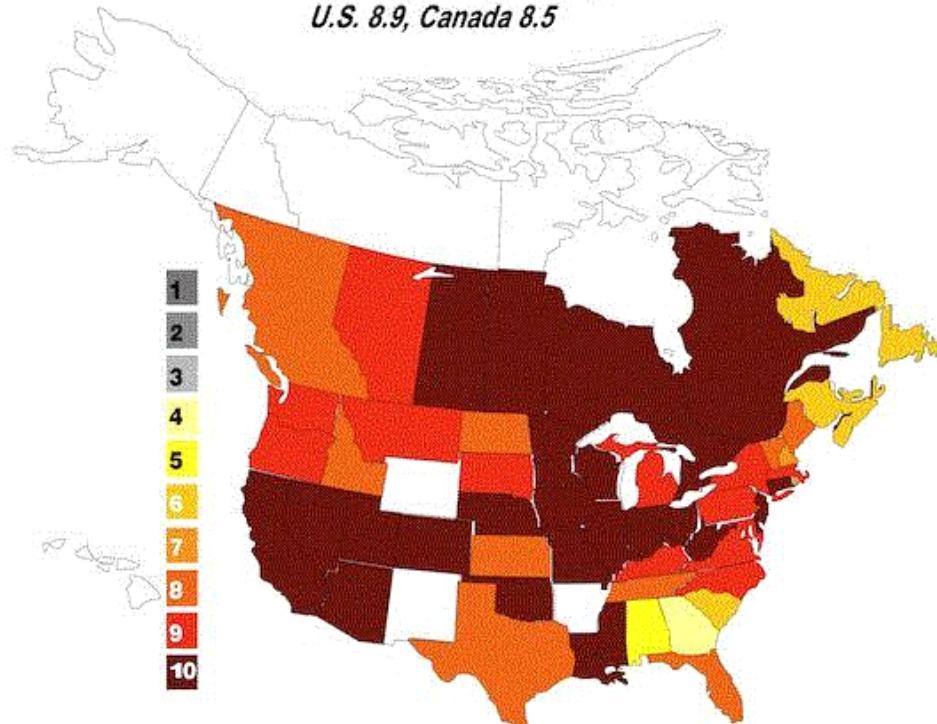


May

May sales started off better than 2024, but worse than the previous weekend, with you scoring it 7.2 in the U.S. and 7.3 in Canada—not what we want to see in May. But you made up for all the poor weekends at Mother's Day, which I wrote was the "Best ever in the U.S. (except for two)." You sent in 83 perfect 10s out of 151 scores (55%) and scored the holiday 8.9 in the U.S. and 8.5 in Canada. The only years you scored Mother's Day higher since I started this survey in 2012 were 2021 and 2023. And yet it could have been better, as New England suffered windy, wet, raw conditions on Saturday of the holiday weekend.

Weekend Rating—Mother's Day 2025

U.S. 8.9, Canada 8.5



Alas, the rest of the month was "ho-hum" as I wrote about May 17-18 (which was the big three-day Victoria Day Weekend in Canada). You scored it 7.6 in the U.S. and 7.3 in Canada. Memorial Day (8.0/7.5) was average in the U.S. and below average in Canada. We were running out of weekends and it was starting to look like it was going to be just an average season for many of you. Bummer!

New Project? Build it Efficiently.
Heating systems engineered for performance from day one.
BioTherm-designed heating systems with RBI boilers and Sterling unit heaters.

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June

Summer arrived with me revealing that LiveTrends had been named Target's 2024 Food & Beverage Partner of the Year. A plant company? Yeah, because floral falls under produce and produce is part of food & beverage ... which has LiveTrends competing against category giants like Chiquita, Frito-Lay, PepsiCo and other multi-billion multinationals. Well done to Bisser Georgiev and his team!



In negative company news, Gardener's Supply Company filed Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection. At the time, there was speculation that Gardens Alive! might purchase the Vermont-based employee-owned company. And that was indeed what happened, in August, for around \$9 million.

I also announced that my parent company, Ball Horticultural Company, would be restructuring its R&D operations to streamline its breeding projects, and so would be closing its Santa Paula (California) breeding and trialing facility. Now all U.S. breeding will take place in Elburn, Illinois, and Guadelupe, California (the old Waller Flowerseed location).



July

I welcomed the new president of Costa Farms, Jose Smith Jr., son of Joe and Maria Smith, the co-owners and co-builders of the Homestead, Florida, mega-grower. Jose Jr. is one smart cookie, with a degree in mechanical engineering from MIT and an MBA from Harvard Business School.

In a scary greenhouse scenario, I reported on the sudden collapse of a 22-acre glass greenhouse in the Netherlands. The cause? The removal of some important bracing during the installation of a curtain system and some coastal winds. One or two braces? Fine. But a whole section of them? Nope. Don't do it! Fortunately, none of the 65 employees were in the greenhouse at 4:30 that Friday afternoon.

And I tallied up your score for Spring 2025: 7.4 in the U.S. and 6.9 in Canada—an okay spring, not great, not bad. The 13-year average for the entire season is 7.2/7.2, so it was just slightly above average in the U.S.

Oh, and I published the annual Spring River Ridge Report, the gardening survey of my (former) Chicagoland neighborhood. Good news: Gardening participation was up slightly, to 59.5%, from 57.5% last year. The nine-year average is 59%.



August

I opened my first newsletter of August with the sad news of three industry passings: Jim Youngsman, founder of Skagit Gardens; John Guenther, long time controller and senior VP at Ball; and Tom Piini, founder and president of Micro Grow Control Systems. I hate delivering this sort of news ...

Better news was the appointment of the first non-family CEO to Baily Nursery: Jorge Becerra. He's a native of Ecuador, with a strong background in agriculture, degrees from Texas A&M and 25 years with Cargill.

Also in positive business news, my friend Aaron Van Wingerden and his wife, Rozalia, have added a young plant division to their finished plant nursery, Dutch Heritage Gardens in Colorado.



This was in response to having to give up a big grocery customer after it went to a pay-by-scan model and the closing of Welby Gardens, which created a vacuum in the market.



September

Bacterial canker on poinsettias became a thing—something that hasn't happened since the 1940s, according to Dr. Janna Beckerman of Envu, who clued us into the topic. Bill Calkins and the Green Solutions Team at Envu got a fact sheet out to the industry through Bill's *Tech on Demand* newsletter and other places, and hopefully that helped you keep a watchful eye out for the disease. I haven't heard any horror stories from Bill, anyway ...

I gave you a few insights into what I'd been learning about artificial intelligence (AI) in the greenhouse. I think we can expect to first see it connected to environmental control computers, using historical data to make faster and better decisions about heating, cooling, shading and ventilation needs to maintain a better growing environment while (hopefully) spending less on energy. And the technology will roll out on high-dollar crops first—food, medicinals/pharmaceuticals and perhaps young plants.

Lastly, I reported that Minnesota would be getting America's first A1-rated horticultural expo, scheduled for May 1 to October 15, 2032. And that a well-known major Dutch grower, Bunnik Group, was shutting down as of March 31, 2026. They cited post-COVID economic factors like margin pressure, energy costs, tariffs, reduced demand and oversupply. But I pointed out that every grower is facing those same headwinds and yet they remain in business.

October

I used to like Cracker Barrel more than I do now, but my complaint lies with the food, not the branding faux pas they committed that I wrote about in November. At least one of you questioned my Cracker Barrel inclusion, asking what it had to do with the greenhouse business. Easy! Cracker Barrel apparently didn't know their customer as well as they should have, otherwise, they never would have launched a new brand that: 1) made their otherwise very identifiable sign look like Denny's; and 2) expunged the likeable character of Uncle Herschel. In other words, you

need to know your customer. Ask them questions!

Also in October, my colleague and partner in crime Bill Calkins hit a podcast milestone with 200 episodes of Tech on Demand. That run puts Bill in the top 1% of podcasters worldwide! His guest for #200 was Dr. Jamie Gibson of Syngenta Flowers. I'm proud to say that I was his guest for #100. Who will it be for #300?



Lastly, big private equity news, as the founders of Proven Winners, Four Star Greenhouses and Pleasant View Gardens had partnered with Staple Street Capital. Why do the deal? It would allow those two businesses to partner in a way they couldn't when they were competitors—things like unifying tray sizes, product mix and distribution strategies. And it was about long-term security for the businesses and the families that own them.

November

This month, I published the 20th edition of the Fall River Ridge Report, in which I said, "There's bad news, but there's good news, too"—meaning that while gardening participation in River Ridge had dropped from 66% of households to 63% (12 fewer homes out of 356), more of those who did garden choose our products with which to do so.

Also this month I announced the pending retirement of Ken Fisher, president and CEO of AmericanHort, after a 10-year career leading our national trade association.

And in an effort to provide good news whenever possible, especially since I reported negative news on the same topic, I visited Brad's Bedding in Fort Pierce, Florida, to see their rebuilt operation and new greenhouse.



Brad's was hit hard by a tornado spawned by Hurricane Milton in 2024, losing about \$1.5 million in crops, including poinsettias. It was nice to see Brad's second location (his main nursery is down in Delray Beach) back up and running at full tilt!

December



December tends to be 80% poinsettias and the rest random news and calendar events for the coming busy January. I covered the trials at Heimos in Illinois (including Hortistican Dr. Marvin Miller teaching us the nine kinds of bracts), while Jen Zurko visited Plantpeddler's trial in Iowa. Plus information gathered from North Carolina and Australia, where I learned that they sell Princettia as a leading poinsettia variety at Christmas (it takes the heat) and they sell it again in

the middle of their winter (June/July). Oh, and I wrote that I ate a poinsettia leaf in front of the Bloom & Grow Garden Society of Winter Garden, Florida, to prove that they're not poisonous. (Not that they taste all that good ...)

There was merger news, with Metrolina and South Central Growers joining together to better serve their mass market customers. It wasn't a shock to me—the owners are like-minded cousins who share values, culture and business philosophies.

In sad news, I reported on the untimely and unexpected passing of industry icon Gary Mangum, co-founder and former owner of Bell Nursery in Maryland. Gary was a pioneer, a visionary and a friend to many of us.

What does 2026 have in store for us? My first wish is that the weather is like Camelot's: July and August cannot be too hot, winter is forbidden 'til December (and exit March the second on the dot), the rain may never fall 'til after sundown and by 8:00 the morning fog must disappear.

Given pleasant weather, my next hope is that millions upon millions of consumers—especially newer, younger ones—experience that primal urge to get their hands in the soil and decide to visit a garden center. I firmly believe there's a gardening seed planted deep inside each and every one of us and it takes very little to make it germinate—the sight of a beautiful flower, the fragrance of moist earth, the taste of a fresh tomato.



Feel free to email me at beytes@gowertalks.com if you have ideas, comments or questions.

Merry Christmas & Happy New Year!

Chi

Chris Beytes
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