

MANTS; RIP Ludwig Kientzler; Marshall Retires; Holiday Spending—Up!



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FRIDAY, JANUARY 16, 2026

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#### COMING UP THIS WEEK:

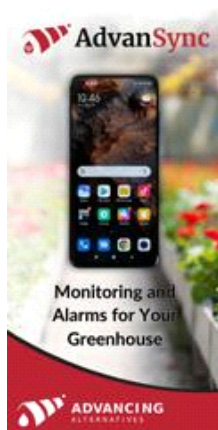
The Chris Beytes Podcast #2  
MANTS: Big and bright, says Jen  
In memoriam: Ludwig Kientzler  
Marshall says goodbye to PW  
Curt flies from Four Star  
Holiday spending up 4.1%  
Three interesting PPA webinars  
Seed Your Future at TPIE  
Finally ...

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**The Chris Beytes Podcast #2 featuring Isabela Chamorro**



Guest star of my second Young Grower Award winner podcast is our current title-holder, Isabela Chamorro, the 2025 YGA winner.

Isabela's story is fascinating—she's from Nicaragua, where she worked for Ball FloraPlant for two years. But she's a risk-taker and she wanted to explore what else was out there while she was young, so she signed up for an internship at Mahoney's Garden Center in Massachusetts. Only, she didn't quite know just how far north Massachusetts is! She recalls that after two hours of flying, she asked a flight attendant when they were going to land. The answer was in four hours.

"When I landed, I grabbed my tablet and I'm like, 'Where am I?' And I called my mother. 'Mom. I'm almost in Canada!'"

She wasn't in Nicaragua anymore, that's for sure, but the risk paid off, because she's still there and thriving as their perennial specialist. And she's a Young Grower Award winner!



Watch and listen to our full conversation [HERE](#).

Oh, as an aside, somebody pointed out that last week's newsletter still had my "Merry Christmas & Happy New Year" complimentary close (to use formal letter-writing parlance) at the end even though it was already January 9. My personal statute of limitations for "Happy New Year" is the 15th. But Merry Christmas? That officially expired January 6 (Epiphany).

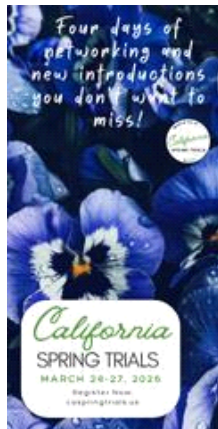
In reality, I swear I changed it back to my usual signoff, but I must not have hit "save."

Anyway, on to the news, which starts with reporting on MANTS by *GrowerTalks* Managing Editor Jen Polanz, who attended for the first time in a decade and had her eyes opened.



**MANTS: As big and bright as ever**



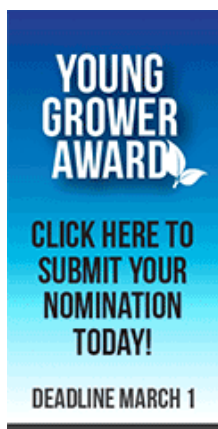
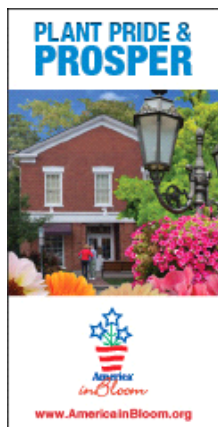


It's been more than 10 years since I was last at the Mid-Atlantic Nursery Trade Show—aka MANTS (I've been going to Atlanta Market the last couple of years), and, boy, I'd forgotten just how big it is. It's a good thing I brought my comfy shoes!

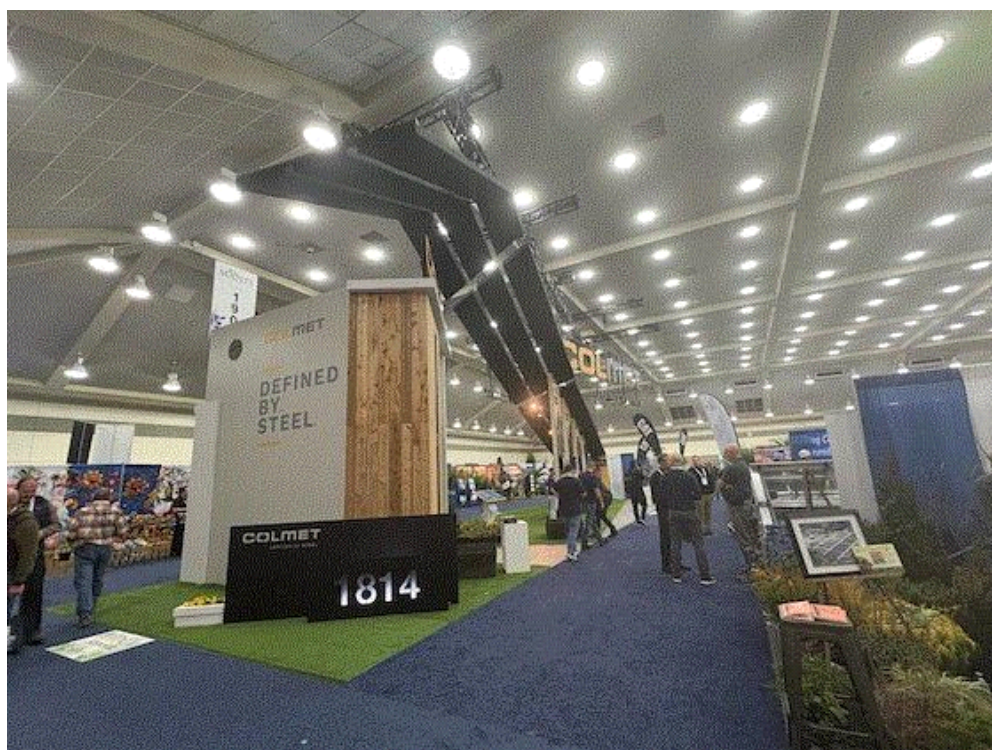


By all accounts, MANTS is the annual kickoff to the horticulture year. Did you know it dates all the way back to 1970, making it 56 years old? And while it didn't set records for attendance this year, it also wasn't far off, with more than 10,800 visitors in attendance and more than 890 exhibiting companies filling the Baltimore Convention Center. The record still remains 2008, with more than 12,800 visitors, according to the showrunners. Still, it was still an impressive turnout, boding well for 2026, and while the action on the trade show floor ebbed and flowed, the exhibitors I talked to said they were having quality conversations with attendees.





Nearly 11,000 visitors attended this year's MANTS.



The largest and most impressive booth at MANTS by far was the Colmet booth—it stretched all the way to the ceiling!

As far as the mood? Cautiously optimistic, I'd say, with some exhibitors saying they're seeing conservative orders being placed by growers and retailers. I didn't hear a lot of talk about inflation or tariffs—at this point those just seem baked into the cost of doing business and vendors are becoming more strategic about where they source product.

There were some interesting products there that could help growers and retailers differentiate themselves. Watch for our coverage in the March issue of *GrowerTalks/Green Profit* for more! Also, if you introduced something new and I didn't see you at your booth, feel free to email me at [HERE](#) and tell me about it.

Mark your calendar now for next year's show: January 13-15, 2027.



# NEW FOR 2026



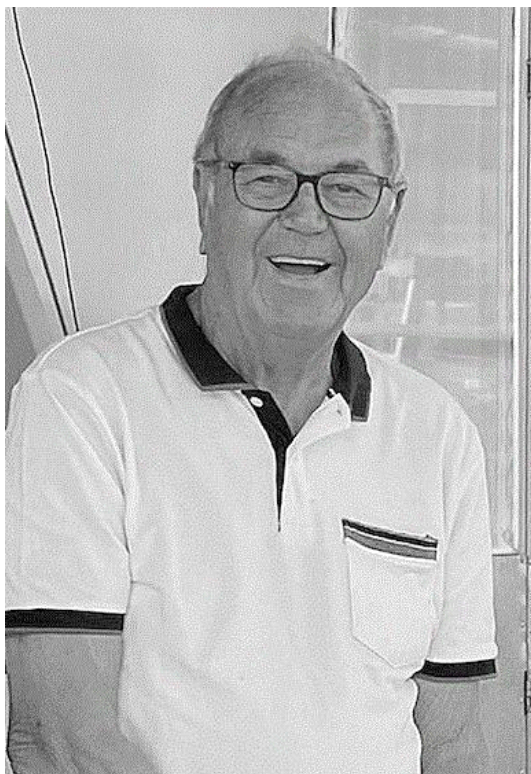
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## In memoriam: Ludwig Kientzler

A pioneer of international floriculture and the vegetative plant market, Ludwig Kientzler, third-generation patriarch of his family's business, Kientzler Young Plants, passed away January 4 at the age of 79.

Born in 1946 in post-war Germany as the eldest son of Ludwig und Else Kientzler, he learned horticulture first-hand by working in the family nursery along with his younger brother, Helmut (who passed away in 2018) and sister, Iris. The sudden death of Ludwig, Sr. galvanized the will of his widow to preserve and expand the family nursery for her three still very young children, so she set up a new location in nearby Gensingen. This difficult period nurtured Ludwig Kientzler's independent nature and his striving for perpetual change; even at a young age, he was very much involved in the expansion of the Kientzler company.

A few highlights from Ludwig's career include the introduction of Paradise New Guinea Impatiens, which he bred to be an improvement over the earlier hybrids. The series took the bedding plant world by storm and is still successful in the marketplace.



As the vegetative plant market grew more global in the 1980s, new plant diseases from abroad appeared—a major challenge for young-plant suppliers. Ludwig set the groundwork for a testing program for phytopathogenic diseases—beginning with the most popular new crops, but then expanding to include all crops in production. Up until this time, such an elaborate clean-stock system for bedding plants had only been applied to pelargonium. The Kientzler subsidiary InnovaPlant was founded in the early 1990s specifically for the elite program, license management, breeding and product development.



## Ludwig (continued)

Another highlight from Ludwig's career was developing a network of like-minded young plant nurseries that would cover their respective markets and jointly introduce these new crops from clean stock and with solid marketing in place. The culmination of this was the Proven Winners network, the partners of which embraced Kientzler's unique, high-quality genetics.

With the increased demand for their genetics, Kientzler established InnovaPlant de Costa Rica s.a. and later TicoPlant s.a. in order to supply the international Proven Winners network with unrooted cuttings and tissue-cultured plantlets. Under Ludwig supervision, coffee fields were transformed into 12 hectares of modern greenhouse facilities and a state-of-the-art tissue culture laboratory.

Garry Grüber (who contributed the details of Ludwig's life above), was a long-time employee, colleague and friend of Ludwig's. They met way back in 1987 when Garry was working in the floriculture institute of Geisenheim University.

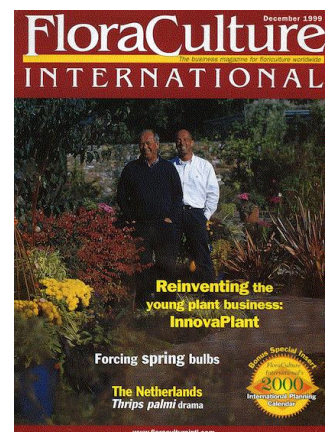
Garry told me via email, "When he found out that my work focus was new ornamentals, plus the added bonus of being multilingual and a U.S. citizen, he rather aggressively tried to recruit me for the Kientzler company... and I eventually relented and took his offer. It was a wild ride indeed after that."

Garry went on to manage the Ecke relationship as the company expanded beyond poinsettias into annuals and was instrumental in helping get the Proven Winners brand off the ground, which Kientzler actively supported with new varieties, clean stock and marketing tools.

Said Garry of Ludwig, "He was my mentor and, in many ways, almost a father-figure to me."

Ludwig's son Andreas is the fourth generation in the family business; his son just came into the business to represent the fifth generation of Kientzler.

Wrote Andreas, "Our utmost goal is to remain as a family business in our industry, being motivated by the great work of the former generations."



Ludwig (left) and Andreas made the cover of our December 1999 issue of *FloraCulture International* under the headline, "Reinventing the Young Plant Business," written by editor Debbie Hamrick.

Said Garry, "I think that Ludwig and I did indeed live up to that claim in the end."



## Marshall Dirks retires from Proven Winners

Speaking of “The #1 Plant Brand in North America,” the fellow who was instrumental in that bringing that boast to fruition is retiring. Marshall Dirks, who for 27 years has been one of the most aggressive and innovative plant marketers in the business, has retired from Proven Winners. His last day was Friday, January 9.

“I am incredibly grateful for the people I’ve worked with and the friendships I’ve made along the way” said Marshall, who joined Proven Winners in 2000 after a seven-year stint as a product manager for Ball. “It’s been a privilege to be part of this team and to tell the story of a brand that I truly believe in.”

“We are extremely happy for Marshall and his family,” said Mark Broxon, CEO of Proven Winners. “He has so many other interests and passions that he wants to pursue, and we are proud that he is moving to this next phase of his life. He has been a huge part of our success over the years.”

With Marshall’s departure, Brian Oster, currently the Senior Marketing Director for Proven Winners North America, will assume Marshall’s responsibilities.



Marshall shows me and Jen Polanz their new (for 2025) new Eco+Quart compostable pots and compostable plant tags. Sustainability is one of his many passions.

While Marshall may be retiring from Proven Winners, he’s not really retiring. He told me in a brief call before the official announcement that he’ll certainly spend more time with his family, do plenty of volunteering and he might even take on some part-time projects within the industry. But first:

“Rest and abide in the little bit of downtime I have before I fill my cup,” he joked, adding that he’s prone to taking on way too many projects.



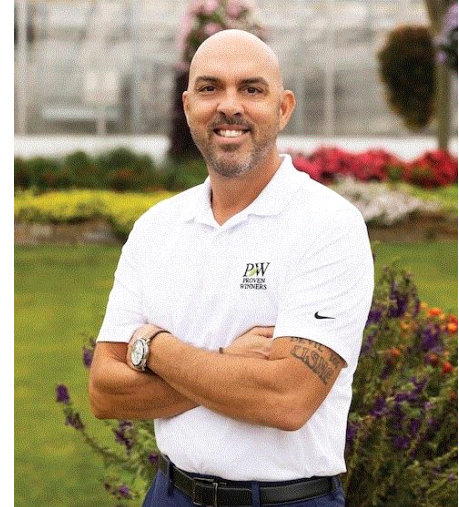


## Curt has left Four Star for a much higher position

In a somewhat related, but unrelated, move, Curt Varsogea, VP of Sales & Business Development for Proven Winners' founding partner Four Star Greenhouses in Michigan, will be departing the company to—get this—pursue his long-time dream of becoming a commercial airline pilot! That's not a horticulture career transition I've ever seen before.

According to his LinkedIn, he's currently in training with Envoy Air (aka American Eagle). And for more than a year, he's been first officer on a Flexjet Embraer Phenom 300 (said to be the world's most-flown private jet).

But it's not surprising when you learn that Curt comes from a family deeply rooted in aviation. And that he's spent the last 24 years learning to fly various types of aircraft. In fact, a shared love of flying is how he met Four Star's Tom Smith. Their friendship eventually turned into a job offer when in 2006, Tom lured Curt away from the automotive industry, where he was selling parts to the Big Three automakers.



"Working at Four Star has changed my life in so many positive ways—through the people I've met, the work I've been able to do, and the personal and professional growth that came with it," he said. "It's never just been about selling plants; it's always been about the relationships."

He adds that the most meaningful part of his career has been the people he's worked alongside and the connections formed along the way.

"I'll always treasure the time I spent with Tom and everything he's taught me. I love Proven Winners and the people behind it. I've truly had so much fun."



## Holiday spending up 4.1% over 2024



Last week, I told you to take National Retail Federation Valentine's Day data with a grain of salt. One week later, I'm reporting NRF data on holiday sales.

What has changed?

Well, in this case, the NRF forecast is supported by actual sales data from the CNBC/NRF Retail Monitor, which reports actual sales (hey, maybe that means their V'Day data is accurate, too!).

NRF forecast that holiday sales would be up by 3.7% to 4.2%. The Retail Monitor data says 2025 holiday sales (which they consider being from November 1 through December 31) grew 4.1%, to just over \$1 trillion. A late Thanksgiving pushed Cyber Monday into December in 2025, so an additional busy day of holiday spending is included in December's data.

"December Retail Monitor data saw a sharp surge in growth as consumers continued prioritizing holiday spending on family and friends," said NRF President & CEO Matthew Shay. "Continued economic momentum helped land 2025 holiday sales near the top of NRF's forecast, reaffirming that consumers remain on solid footing."

Unlike survey-based numbers collected by the Census Bureau, the Retail Monitor uses actual, anonymized credit and debit card purchase data compiled by Affinity Solutions.



## What categories were up? (Or down?)

December sales were up in six out of nine categories on a yearly basis, led by clothing stores, sporting goods stores and digital products. But, unfortunately for us, the data for Building and Garden Supply Stores wound up at the bottom of the heap:

**Clothing and accessories** stores were up 2.05% month-over-month seasonally adjusted and up 6.11% year-over-year unadjusted.

**Sporting goods, hobby, music and book** stores were up 3.52% month-over-month seasonally adjusted and up 5.16% year-over-year unadjusted.

**Digital products** (such as electronic books and games) were up 0.98% month-over-month seasonally adjusted and up 3.6% year-over-year unadjusted.

**General merchandise** stores were up 2.9% month-over-month seasonally adjusted and up 3.42% year-over-year unadjusted.

**Grocery and beverage** stores were up 0.33% month-over-month seasonally adjusted and up 2.85% year-over-year unadjusted.

**Health and personal care** stores were up 1.92% month-over-month seasonally adjusted and up 2.5% year-over-year unadjusted.

**Electronics and appliance** stores were up 2.28% month-over-month seasonally adjusted, but down 0.09% year-over-year unadjusted.

**Furniture and home furnishings** stores were up 0.33% month-over-month seasonally adjusted, but down 0.82% year-over-year unadjusted.

**Building and garden supply** stores were up 1.11% month-over-month seasonally adjusted, but down 5.3% year-over-year unadjusted.

Bummer! Up in December, but down a lot for the year. Experts pin the decline on a few factors, including:

- The general downturn in construction activity, including a 1.4% decline in remodeling expenditures.
- A shift in spending priorities, as consumers move back towards services, travel, dining out and other experiences as post-pandemic norms return, moving away from the home-focused spending patterns of the pandemic.
- The decline comes after several years of strong performance and elevated sales during the pandemic-era DIY boom.

So don't assume it means consumers aren't buying our flowers and plants! Instead, they're not buying 2x4s, paint and new grills.

To learn more, [CLICK HERE](#).



## Three interesting Perennial Plant Association webinars

If you'd like to further your knowledge this winter, [PPA](#) has a few opportunities for you in February and March on the topics of landscape design, sustainability and even Groovy Plants Ranch in Ohio. Here are the details:

### **Sustaining Dynamic Landscape Designs Panel**

February 10, 11:30 a.m. - 1:15 p.m. EST

Join PPA for a webinar on implementing dynamic landscape designs. Their distinguished panel—featuring Richard Hayden (High Line), Kathryn Deery (Lurie Garden) and Marek Pundzak (Arboretum at Penn State)—will share insights from recent major renovations, highlighting staff and practice evolution. Gain actionable strategies for landscape project management, staff development and long-term maintenance of complex horticultural designs, including adapting to environmental changes, integrating new technologies and fostering continuous improvement.



Following their short presentations, a moderated roundtable Q&A session will provide an opportunity for attendees to engage directly with the panelists, asking questions and sharing their own experiences. This is an unparalleled opportunity to learn from the best in the field and network with peers who share a passion for innovative and sustainable landscape design.

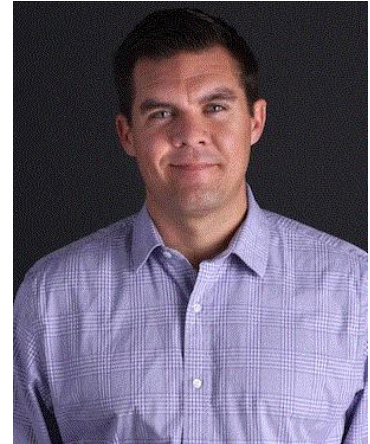


## Be a More Resilient (Sustainable) Company with Seth Reed of Ball Horticultural Company

February 20, 1:00 p.m. EST

Resilient companies can adapt quickly to difficult situations and are less likely to fail when times are tough. What makes a company resilient? Sustainability! It's so much more than solar panels, icebergs and recycling. There are hundreds of different ways for your business to be more sustainable. By implementing key strategies, you can help build the support of your local community, the loyalty of your workforce and the resiliency of your business.

In this session, Seth Reed will talk about key sustainability strategies and practices that are part of Ball Horticultural Company's 10-year road map as illustrated in their newly published Sustainability Report. (Thanks to sponsor Pleasant Run Nursery.)

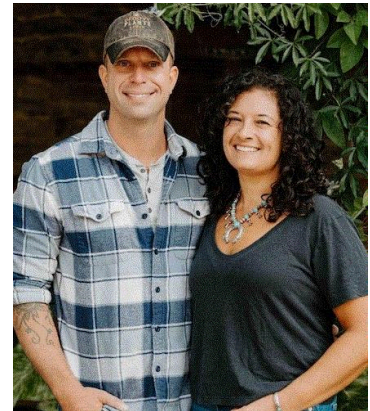


## A Look at Groovy Plants Ranch—Their fun approach to marketing and horticulture

March 10, 1:00 p.m. EST

Join Jared and Liz Hughes of Groovy Plants Ranch to learn more about creative ways they're connecting with garden center customers.

Groovy Plants Ranch is a garden center like no other: where a deep love of plants and horticulture is enhanced by fun, whimsy and an extreme attention to detail. Jared and Liz will talk about their unique approach to plant collecting and selling, highlighting their rare succulents, hard-to-find perennials and houseplants. They'll also be sharing beautiful shots from their gardens and shop. Groovy Plants Ranch is a plant lover's haven like no other! (Thanks to sponsor Pleasant Run Nursery.)



Find all three of these webinars and more [HERE](#).

Each session is just \$40. Students are free if you sign up with a valid school email address.

And mark your calendar for PPA's [National Symposium](#) in East Lansing, Michigan, July 27-30.



## Seed Your Future partners with FNGLA at TPIE

[Seed Your Future](#), the movement to promote horticulture and inspire young people to pursue careers working with plants, has announced a partnership with the Florida Nursery, Growers & Landscape Association (FNGLA) to introduce a reimagined career fair experience at the Tropical Plant International Expo (TPIE). The refreshed program is designed to connect students and educators with real-world opportunities across the green industry through immersive, on-the-show -floor engagement. And from what I hear, they've already got 170 students signed up—that's 170 potential future employees and possible Young Grower Award winners!

“FNGLA and Seed Your Future are both committed to opening doors for the next generation,” said Jazmin Albarran, executive director of Seed Your Future. “By learning about new opportunities, meeting industry professionals face to face and seeing the work happening on the show floor, students will gain a clearer picture of where their passions can take them.”

As part of this partnership, Seed Your Future will deliver a refreshed career fair schedule that blends structured programming with hands-on exploration. Students and educators will take part in a series of activities designed to introduce them to the people and professions shaping the green industry, including:

- TPIE and Career Fair introductions from FNGLA Leadership
- Group scavenger hunts to 30-plus exhibitor booths on the show floor
- Self-led exhibitor visits for deeper exploration

“The 2026 TPIE Career Fair marks a new chapter in how industry and education can come together to showcase the future of horticulture,” said Merry Mott, director of certifications and career development at FNGLA. “This event gives students a chance to make meaningful industry connections and discover the many opportunities waiting for them.”

The career fair will take place at the Broward County Convention Center in Fort Lauderdale on Friday, January 23 from 10:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. with the option to re-enter the show after lunch for self-guided exploration.

If you're attending or exhibiting at TPIE and want to be part of this initiative, please contact Courtney Dyal [HERE](#).



## Finally ...

I'll be at TPIE and will look for the young'uns on Friday and try to lure them into our industry with tales of the amazing places they can go and people they can meet. Like Fort Lauderdale ... and me! Or Essen, Germany, for IPM, where I will be the week after TPIE. So, like always, expect reports almost live from the scene as I look for new plants, new products and new ideas here and abroad.

In the meantime, here's something I learned from Jane Stanley, our 2016 Young Grower Award winner, whom I interviewed earlier today for my Chris Beytes Podcast. She's a remarkable woman who's been a grower and is now a manager of technical services for chemical company [Atticus LLC](#). I asked her how we find the next "Jane Stanley" and she suggested not only looking at ag programs or plant science classes or other obvious classrooms.

"There are a lot of different skillsets and ways of looking at things that are really valuable to this industry," she said. "So I think recruiting from outside just the traditional programs can, I think, be really valuable."

But, she added, being willing to talk to students, period, is a "really great first step."

So let's get out there and talk to some students about our amazing industry!



Feel free to email me at [beytes@growertalks.com](mailto:beytes@growertalks.com) if you have ideas, comments or questions.

See you next time!



**Chris Beytes**

Editor-in-Chief

*GrowerTalks & Green Profit*

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