

GROWERTALKS

Columns

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Getting My Groove Back

Paul Westervelt

I've been fascinated by plants for most of my life, but I've never been able to put my finger on why. They've just held a certain magic.

Spring in this industry can do a number on that magic. With your head down in production, plants can become widgets, sell-through percentages, pest magnets and divas. They can be a frustration and a disappointment. If I've done my job exactly right, they should sell before they peak so I only get to see the warm-up. When things go a little nutty in spring, I end up going with them and that can pickle my outlook when planning future production. When I start to flounder, I need a shot of inspiration.

My first head grower, Shelton Singletary, told me he liked to walk houses right after everybody left because the plants talked to him at that time of day. I thought he was nuts, but it turns out he was right. When tractors aren't groaning around the nursery and the radio's quiet, when I can hear the wind and the buzzing of pollinators on our crops, I notice things I miss at other times. Something that simply felt out of sync earlier in the day jumps out as benefitting from cooler roots or different growing media. A walk in the woods at home helps me remember we live in a beautiful place and we produce a product with the ability to make it even more beautiful.

Industry events are a natural pick-me-up, too, though I should confess that I don't work a booth. Two of my favorite recharging shows are Cultivate and the Perennial Plant Association Symposium, which are both now behind us, but there are plenty of other opportunities, like Farwest later this month, and many smaller regional events. The networking, educational sessions and trade shows always leave me on a bit of a high, in spite of the big to-do list.

Our production team makes a point of visiting a few different growers each year. In addition to being exposed to new products, I value talking with other growers about how they finish the same product I do. Learning about their soil mix, how they irrigate, the minor tweaks to problem crops—even just commiserating over how lousy a certain plant is can help me get back in the groove. Everyone has a slightly different way of doing things and I always come away from a grower visit with promising ideas.

While all of that is great, nothing hits my reset button like visiting a public garden. I think it's easy to lose sight of how our products can be used, so even a quick visit to a public garden can fill me up. Earlier this summer, I

was in Chicago for the Darwin Perennial Day, which offered a great opportunity to squeeze in visits to some gardens in the area (turn to page 52 to see some photos).

The Chicago Botanic Garden's perennial trial area was so awesome that we ran out of time to see the rest of the place. The fizzles were just as fascinating as the best performers. The Schulenberg Prairie at the Morton Arboretum had thousands of perennials (per species), including some we all grow, spread across 100 acres. I couldn't quite imagine buffalo, but the huge, intermingled sweeps of perennials were breathtaking. The Lurie Garden was a distilled version of the Schulenberg, with all of the showiest plants stuffed into two acres to spectacular effect. It's the kind of garden that makes you dream. That's why I do this ... that feeling.

Spring is hard and when I come out of spring, I'm ground down to some degree. It's possible to convince myself to keep grinding away—there's always more that needs done—but getting out and seeing part of what made me choose horticulture in the first place is how I fill up for the next big push. **GT**

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