

# GROWERTALKS

## Columns

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## Grumbles & Gripes

*Steve Hutton*

It's spring. Why am I so grumbly?

I think it started deep in winter at the IPM Show in Essen, Germany. Those of you who've been to the show know all about it. For those of you who haven't, this short description should do: Just go.

The IPM Show is our industry at its best and at its biggest. During four days, 1,500 exhibitors host over 50,000 attendees from some 50 countries. You'll see trees, shrubs, perennials, annuals, potted plants, cut flowers, nursery and greenhouse equipment, garden decor and more. And you'll see this all displayed in high style—choreography in chlorophyll. I'm so exhilarated and overwhelmed that when I leave every year I'm deeply depressed.

The reason for this is simple—compared to the displays at the IPM Show, the displays at retail in our country are dismal. At IPM, a merely average booth contains plant material that's very well presented and an exceptional booth is truly inspiring. And the best packaging is as good as you'll see with any packaged consumer good of any type. The first thing you notice is not the beautifully grown plants, it's the staggeringly imaginative displays—there's color, there's whimsy, there's creativity, there's drama, there's humor. Most importantly, there's engagement.

This is not only what it could be for green goods at retail, it's what it should be. After all, our products are the definition of beauty, of style, of charm. They're an item of decor. Why are they displayed at retail like bad guys in a police lineup, standing on pallets propped up by cinder blocks? And this isn't just at big boxes; it's at too many independent garden centers as well. At times, I think the spark plug display at the Napa Auto Parts store has more panache. I told you I was grumbly . . .

Okay, I'm not a retailer; I'm a breeder-grower, so easy for me to say. What I need to do is look in the mirror and ask what we breeders, we growers, can do to help our retailer brothers and sisters sell our plants. Our job doesn't end with filing a plant patent, with loading the last cart on the truck; our job ends when the retailer sells the plant we bred and grew, so our job includes working with garden centers to do just that. Complaining is cheap and easy; it's fixing the problem that's hard.

So how do we go about doing that? It starts with a conversation. We need to talk to open-minded retailers.

What can we do to help you create an environment that will sell more plants to many more (and many new) consumers? What can we do to help you get your best customers to visit your store every 10 days throughout the season and your worst customers to visit three times a season? And for all of them to buy 10% more? What can we do together to remind the public that plants are a necessity? There's an answer somewhere. Or rather, there are answers somewhere.

I write this on a plane as I return from California Spring Trials, where the same sort of breath-taking displays of plants abound. As with IPM, they're inspiring ... and they're depressing. They're a reminder of what retail could be.

If I'm ever asked to write another guest column—most unlikely after what you've just read—maybe I need to really look in the mirror and ask what the heck we're doing to you.

Oh, man, am I grumbly ... **GT**

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*Steve Hutton is President of Star Roses and Plants, a leading genetics company involved directly in breeding roses, perennials and woody plants, and introducing plants from other breeders around the world.*