

GROWERTALKS

Acres & Acres

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How I Got Here

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We spend a lot of time trying to figure out how to attract the next generation of plant geeks and greenhouse nerds, and I find it's always interesting to ask people who are already in the industry, "How did you get here?"

Somebody asked me that question recently, so I told them, and they said, "You oughta put that in *GrowerTalks*." This being a slow month for news, and my muse having gone on vacation and left me short of clever ideas, I'll oblige.

Spring 1980 in Gainesville, Florida. Picture me as a long-haired surfer/drummer at the University of Florida, majoring in music (Or was it graphic design? I switched every few months).

I shared a mobile home with three guys, Tom, Eddie and Tom, and one afternoon, Eddie and I hit the local Kmart to buy a few flowers to plant in the inside-out tire planter at the end of our driveway (seriously—I can show you how to make one).

Now, at the time I knew nothing about plants or horticulture—I grew up in a typical suburban subdivision—but having been raised by a Depression-era parent, I did know a bargain when I saw one; and a pack of six flowering plants for \$0.66 was something even this poor college kid could afford. So while Eddie bought plants for the trailer, I picked out three packs of something called Cocktail begonias—Whisky, Gin and Vodka—and blew \$2 on my girlfriend, Laurie.

Laurie was overjoyed! Being a southern girl, with a dad who liked his vegetable garden, she was excited to try to grow them. Woodworking being one of my hobbies, I built her three planter boxes for the railing of her condo balcony, filled them with soil, and the begonias took off.

Laurie's love of plants took off, too. This was the tail end of the houseplant craze, and within a month she had two or three dozen assorted philodendron, pothos, peperomias and pileas. She had been considering nursing or veterinary science as a career but quickly switched her major to ornamental horticulture.

Fortunately, UF had a world-class program with faculty like Terril Nell and Jim Barrett.

I need a major, too; and Laurie, knowing that numbers weren't my long suit, pointed out that journalism had a minimal math prerequisite. Having gotten A's in my freshman English writing courses, I figured I'd give it a try.

Now Laurie is studying horticulture, and I'm learning to type on an IBM Selectric (30 words a minute minimum to get into Reporting 101). Oh, did I mention we got married? September 1981.

Somewhere around that time, her dad, a physician, brought up the idea of us going into the nursery business by converting the family's now-empty boarding stables into greenhouses.

We said sure, why not? Which is why when it came time for me to choose a minor, I selected horticulture. I took all the basic classes, and learned enough to be dangerous. As we got closer to graduation, Laurie's advisor, Dr. Nell, helped us with our business plan.

One thing that changed early on was the idea of converting barns into greenhouses. Dr. Nell had suggested we survey our future customers to see what sorts of plants they wanted. We assumed we'd grow foliage, like every other nursery in the state. Nope. Our customers, who were 99% retail florists, didn't want foliage, they wanted weekly and holiday blooming plants. Dr. Nell suggested we couldn't grow mums, gloxinias and poinsettias in converted barns. We'd need benches, drip irrigation, fan-and-pad cooling, a blackcloth system ... bank loan time!

We graduated in May of 1993, and after a Mother's Day weekend working for a local florist (our only industry experience up to that point), we broke ground on Indian River Ornamentals, named in honor of the nearby Indian River and the famous citrus groves that grew along its shores (or at least did back then). We filled it with V-10 and V-14 poinsettias from Ecke and never looked back.

That is, until 1991, and the recession and the decline of the retail florist and rise of the mass market ... which is how I wound up here, at *GrowerTalks*.

Although that story includes an Ace Hardware, the police beat of a local newspaper and a old lady named Mrs. Batty. **GT**

Is your "how I got into horticulture" story interesting and unusual? Send it to me at beytes@growertalks.com and I might just share it.