

GROWERTALKS

Features

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Selling Direct

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Ask any serious gardener: Few things are more evocative of the hobby than a seed or plant catalog, its colorful pages filled with promises of next season's lovely landscapes and bountiful harvests. Which is why the National Mail Order Nursery Association was born way back in 1934, the idea of 13 pioneering nurserymen who were already selling via catalog and wanted to learn and share with each other. Several name changes later (most recently in 2010), the organization has evolved into the Direct Gardening Association (DGA), to accurately reflect the changing times and

technologies.

I was a guest speaker at DGA's summer convention in Portland, Maine, and I was impressed by the breadth of membership—not just the expected seed, bulb and plant companies, but also hardgoods, tools, publishers and providers of services needed by direct sellers: catalog printers, web developers and designers, packaging companies, shippers and so on. Members range from backyard mom & pops to major corporations with multiple catalogs under their purview. Members you may recognize include Gardener's Supply Co., Baker Creek Heirloom Seeds, Holland Bulb Farms, Jackson & Perkins, Logee's Greenhouses, Plant Delights Nursery, and Stark Bros. Nurseries & Orchards.

Ken Oakes of Oakes Daylilies in Corryton, Tennessee, is DGA's current president. His father and grandfather started growing daylilies as a hobby in the 1960s. In the '70s, they started selling plants, and in 1981, they published their first catalog. I asked Ken about his experience with DGA.

"When I first attended conferences, it was a case of 'I didn't know what I didn't know,' you know?" Ken told me. "I was just overwhelmed by all this great information. But also, all the folks there were just really so nice and accommodating and helpful."

I asked him who should consider joining.

"Any company that sells or ships gardening-related products directly to the consumer," he answered. "It could be folks like us who have websites, catalogs, that sort of thing. It could be garden centers who are interested in reaching out to their consumers, offering products on a website or through any kind of printed piece—it doesn't have to be a catalog."

What will you learn? Things you won't find at other mainstream horticulture conferences, Ken says. For instance, shipping.

"You know, I've probably saved enough money just on shipping based upon suggestions I've gotten at the conferences to pay for me for years to go to conferences," Ken says. "In particular, we talk about ways to negotiate shipping, ideas about things to ask for from your shipping vendor, that type of thing. And then other opportunities that I didn't know about, such as regional-rate boxes with the post office. That's saved me a ton of money over the years."

A benefit of DGA membership is getting to network with members who offer services such as graphic design, printing and website development.

"I've met a lot of folks and gotten a lot of suggestions ... I've actually worked with several consultants that I've met through the DGA who've just been invaluable to me being able to grow my business over the years just because they opened my eyes to a whole world that I didn't even know was out there."

I asked Ken if he thinks print catalogs are still relevant in the Internet age. He replied that his company uses them as their primary customer acquisition method.

"The thing about a catalog is, when it shows up in your mailbox, you have to do something with it—you have to look at it at least, whether you open it up or throw it in the trash. It's the one way that you can guarantee to get your company in somebody's hands."

I was curious about the world's biggest online seller, Amazon. Are they a member? A competitor? Where do they fit in to the direct gardening world?

"As a company, Amazon is not a member," Ken answered, "but I know we have several members who are selling and shipping via Amazon. And the topic has definitely been a discussion at our past conferences."

Curious about DGA? Consider attending their winter meeting, January 22-24 in Orlando. You can get the member rate for your first conference. **GT**

For more: www.directgardeningassociation.com