

GROWERTALKS

Acres & Acres

9/1/2018

Then and Now

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Then: Greenhouse owners spent most of their time growing plants and making repairs around the place and gave little thought to selling plants, as customers seemed to materialize out of nowhere and demand was always stronger than supply. There was no marketing budget, except for business cards and the occasional printed price list. You sold a couple of turns of flats and baskets, made good money, then went to the cabin to fish.

Now: Greenhouse owners wish they could spend more time focused on growing crops, but instead they're dealing with labor issues, sweating over regulations and constantly searching for new customers to replace old ones who've gone away. The biggest growing challenge is deciding how much to produce when because you can't afford any shrink. You sell three or four turns of annuals in every container size and shape imaginable, then try to

keep the momentum going through the summer and into the fall because you can't make a living just selling in spring. Grandad's cabin? It's still there, but you're lucky to make one fishing trip a year.

Then: Retail garden centers were seasonal plant stores, and maybe even the local florist or Feed & Seed, too. Many were only open April through fall. The owner wore overalls and a seed company cap and he sold what he liked to grow. Mom was there, too, in the background, unless dad was a farmer and the garden center evolved from a vegetable stand, in which case the retail was mom's project and it made more money than the farm, which is why it eventually grew into a serious, stand-alone business.

Now: Retail garden centers still sell plants—but also gifts, home décor, food, clothing, jewelry, art, pet supplies Most have had to become year-round retailers; in fact, plants are sometimes less important to the business than the other categories. Interestingly, vegetables have made a comeback, and some are finding success as venues for farmers' markets, as today's consumers discover the amazing goodness of farm-fresh vegetables.

Then: Chain stores dabbled in plants, which were generally dropped on the sidewalk for a month or two during spring by growers who saw it as easy money for little work.

Now: Chain stores demand the world from those growers, who have seen easy money and little work morph into little money and much work. Not to mention no sleep, 20,000 shipping racks and an army of merchandisers.

Then: The boss didn't care about your work/life balance. He didn't care whether or not you even had a life. He simply wanted to see "asses and elbows" (as Art Parkerson puts it).

Now: The boss is trying desperately to keep four generations of workers, aged 16 to 75, engaged and enthusiastic because he (or she) doesn't want to lose you. What she (or he) can't offer in money is made up for in a wide array of perks and benefits.

Then: The employee probably came from a farming background and didn't have an opportunity for college and couldn't stand the idea of being stuck indoors in a factory job. Greenhouses, water pipes, tractors, trailers, shovels and potting soil—those were the stuff of a satisfying, 40-year-plus job. As for a "career"? Was that term in anyone's vocabulary back then, other than white-collar professionals? I don't think so.

Now: The employee could come from a farming background ... or Ethiopia or Poland or Cornell University. He or she is probably well-versed in social media, photography, videography and has strong political views that may or may not impact their interactions with fellow employees. Work and life are one, and flexibility to attend to both as they see fit is becoming more and more of a reality in business. If the boss doesn't provide it, he or she will find a job and a boss that will (which is why the average job tenure for a worker aged 25 to 34 is 3.2 years).

Then: Customers knew what they wanted and what to do with it when they got it home. They bought bone meal, for Pete's sake.

Now: Customers know even less than we think they know. They know what's pretty, and what they like, but they don't know what it is or how to use it. They count on us to tell them.

Then: Bone meal was a good way to add phosphorus and calcium to soils.

Now: Bone meal sounds disgusting. So does blood meal. Even if it is organic. Eww! **GT**