

GROWERTALKS

Acres & Acres

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Reliving 1968

Chris Beytes



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There are many fascinating things about being the editor of *GrowerTalks*, not the least of which is having 81 years of horticulture industry history at my fingertips. Next time you're in West Chicago, come by and I'll show you our archives, which go back to 1937 and cover the war years, the fabulous '50s, the energy crisis of the '70s, the earliest computers in the '80s and on and on.

Which brings to mind 1968. Why that year? Because many are comparing today's social and political upheaval, changes and developments with the headlines from that year: two assassinations, the Tet Offensive, the election of Nixon, the Beatles released the White Album, TV's first interracial kiss (on *Star Trek*, no less!), Intel was born, as was the 747 and the Big Mac ... important stuff!

Meanwhile, what was happening in horticulture 50 years ago? Let's grab some back issues and popcorn and find out:

Spring flowering poinsettias. Drs. Kenneth Sink and William Carlson of Michigan State University experimented with flowering two Mikkelsen varieties, Mikkelpink and Mikkeldawn, for Mother's Day sales, and tested at both supermarket and garden centers. The result? "A limited number of plants were sold ... The spring-grown poinsettias were not a 'hot' item in the stores in which they were placed." However, thought the researchers, "If a concentrated effort to inform the consumer about these plants is initiated, poinsettias will have a place in the spring market."

Why greenhouses fail. Vic Ball wrote in the January issue that a large potted plant greenhouse had recently gone out of business. Why? "Selling prices were consistently too low, while sales costs were too high." And they weren't producing as much as their facility was capable of.

Reader Art Bezdek wrote in on the topic of lack of labor, saying, "I guess the answer is to mechanize, use as few people as possible and pay better wages."

Movie time. PanAmerican Seed Company and Jiffy-Pot Company of America launched a 16mm sound and color film titled "Annual Miracle" that "depicts the beauty, rest and relaxation (a prescription for modern living, if you will) that can be obtained through gardening with annuals." Geo. J. Ball would loan a film to anyone interested in showing it to their club or organization.

Build spring sales with vegetable plants. “Indications are that there is increased interest on the part of the home gardener in growing vegetables. Although the average size vegetable garden today is much smaller than the ‘Victory Gardens’ of past years, an ever-increasing percentage of the population is growing vegetable plants. Even apartment dwellers with very limited space are growing a few tomato plants in tubs or boxes on the patio or porch.”

The first National Bedding Plant Conference was held at Michigan State September 16-18 with 170 growers in attendance. Vic Ball’s conclusions of the event:

“The bedding plant industry is big. It is today easily the biggest section of floriculture—ahead of mums, roses. It is by far the fastest growing.”

“Production-wise, the major problem is a most pressing need for mechanization. People who will do hand labor are scarce and costly—and getting more scarce and more costly fast!”

“Marketing-Packaging. Still really in the cracker barrel* stage. You get the feeling that with efficiently mechanized production, tied to really effective modern marketing, this bedding plant business could really go.”

Elfin impatiens from PanAmerican Seed were the hot new annual introduction for the coming season. The eight-color series, bred by Claude Hope, was touted as being more dwarf, free-flowering and earlier than any other impatiens on the market.

Low prices. GrowerTalks surveyed 150 readers about their pricing habits and plants. Vic noted: “Growers tend to live in the world of growing. They like growing! They don’t really like to be so involved in hard economics. So they tend to take the easy way—to not raise prices.”

To buy or not to buy. Geo. J. Ball hired the Institute of Motivational Research to do a study on what drives folks to garden. They found three motivating factors: “A sense of accomplishment,” “It’s fun” and it’s “relaxing therapy.”

Interesting, eh? I guess it just shows that the more things change, the more they stay the same. **GT**