

GROWERTALKS

Acres & Acres

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Steel? Or Camaros?

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A trip to the Netherlands always reminds me that there are three distinct aspects of Dutch greenhouse production.

The first is efficiency. Labor in the Netherlands has long been scarce and expensive, so they've invested in technology to do the repetitive jobs. The typical grower produces thousands of plants week in and week out with relatively few employees. It doesn't hurt that the Dutch greenhouse industry developed as a monoculture system, wherein a grower specializes in one crop (and usually does just a few pot sizes). The Auction is the place where you can find all the variety you need.

Second is consistency. It's almost frightening how uniformly excellent Dutch plants are. I've never seen an uneven crop in a Dutch greenhouse and rarely seen a brown leaf at retail. It's like they stamp them out with a machine.

Again, give much credit to monoculture and automation. You grow one thing all the time, you should be darned good at it.

Third, but definitely not last, is their ability to upgrade and enhance plants from a simple green or blooming thing in a plain pot to a beautiful gift or home décor item. It's this aspect of the Dutch industry that I think has become most important to their success in the 21st Century—it's certainly helping to keep their products relevant to today's consumer. Rather than sell a simple horticultural species in a plastic soil-holding device, they're selling beauty, style, fashion and emotion. And it's not just houseplants receiving this treatment. I've seen perennials and woody ornamentals dressed to the nines, too.

I once heard someone compare this phenomenon to the car industry. Think about one of the materials essential to auto production, steel. By itself, steel is useful, but it's not particularly sexy. But when an automaker adds value to it, such as by stamping it into a curvaceous Camaro fender and applying a shiny coat of rally green metallic paint, a few square feet of steel with a value of maybe \$10 becomes a finished fender worth twenty times that.

Of course, steel manufacturers aren't in the business of building cars, and vice versa, which is why you have both industries. However, steel plants don't stay open long when there's no auto (or appliance or machinery) industries to buy its raw material.

The same goes for Dutch greenhouse companies: they're better known for efficiency and high output than for their fashion sense. Which is why there have long been various ways that plants have been upgraded and enhanced over

the years. Growers have joined together into cooperatives and developed marketing arms that employ designers and artists to create the upgrades. There have been third-party companies that design products under contract. There are outfits that buy plants, upgrade them and resell them themselves.

Nowadays, more and more growers, recognizing the many values of selling a finished product rather than a raw material, are bringing design and marketing in-house. This is evident when you visit a modern Dutch greenhouse range. Used to be, you'd enter the front door and walk immediately into the headhouse, just feet from the production line. Today, you're more likely to first enter a beautifully lit showroom filled with this season's high-fashion finished products. In fact, even the greenhouse offices have gone from functional to fashionable in a generation.

That's not to say North American growers haven't been doing some form of this for years, too— albeit without quite the sense of style and fashion that our European counterparts seem to employ. A pot cover on a poinsettia or mum is easy and inexpensive, but it won't win any design prizes. And with too many of our plant products, we leave it up to the end consumer to do the design work. That leaves us selling low-value steel instead of flashy new cars.

Which is why I encourage you to take a fresh look at plant upgrades. Instead of viewing them as adding cost, consider how they might add perceived value while being more appealing to today's consumers.

After all, steel is boring, but everybody wants a Camaro in their garage. **GT**