

GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Production

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Trade Associations: What's Their Value?

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FNGLA, PNA, AmericanHort, SAF, HRI, NHF, ONLA, NJNLA, CANGC, SNA, GCA, CAL Flowers, etc. OMG—there are so many trade associations and I'm sure I've left plenty out.

Of course this list doesn't count the associations I can remember from years past that have been consolidated or dissolved. More importantly, this list doesn't include the new "non-professional association type groups" found on Facebook or other social media platforms. (We'll talk about this in a few!)

I originally wanted to lead this article with some rather impressive figures that would unequivocally tout the economic importance and success of today's horticulture trade associations. Explaining both their role within government political affairs along with monitoring a quickly evolving marketplace and what would happen without them. However, with the recent passing of my father Theo Bryant, who was such a HUGE advocate for FNGLA and NHF, I thought it more important to draw attention to the human element of these associations and foundations.

As a child growing up in our foliage industry, my family was deeply involved with our local Highland Heartland FNGLA chapter. As I'm sure, similar to many second- and third-generation nursery owners, I was the dirty kid in the back of the meeting room making a ruckus asking Mom and Dad why we were touring another nursery and when it was going to be over. I never truly understood the importance of our nurseryman's association until I learned the history of my own family business and the key role the association played in making it a success.

Not counting political action committees, the purpose of any trade association and/or research foundation is to organize and disseminate new cultural growing research and market information that will ultimately make its members more successful. In the early years of our foliage industry, the much-needed information disseminated by these organizations was what we today would consider general grower knowledge.

Dad told me stories of packed grower seminars "standing-room only" at the twin towers in Orlando. People trying to peek in the back door and straining to hear the presenters. Notes and ideas were exchanged at those industry seminars between new colleagues on what cultural growing methods worked, but more importantly, friendships were forged.

Our industry has always been, in a way, the wild west of agriculture. Foliage products were unbound by rules and standards of market regulation. This meant there was no cap to the value of the plant product, but more importantly, there's no floor either. Those who had the most innovative ideas and were gutsy enough to invest won big. These trade associations helped provide the base knowledge for our family business to take root and then provided the open atmosphere for collaboration between nurserymen, the liner suppliers and allied hardgoods providers.

As my experiences grow through my career, I've had the opportunity to sit on a few foundation and association boards other than the NHF and our local Florida FNGLA. No matter what horticulture group I've invested my time with, there's a relationship and bond formed that would be defined as more than just business. Maybe it's the nature of our business and the good people in our industry, but there's a feeling of care, compassion and family extended by these groups.

Our market is rapidly changing, mainly down the supply chain at the end consumer. Nobody needs to point the finger at the Millennial to tell where these plants are going. Huge studies are being conducted, validating the absolute importance of this young group of consumers for the future of our industry.

When following Facebook group "House Plant Hobbyist" even with an enormous 356,000 members, you can see the personal connection and collaboration of ideas between these consumers. They constantly exchange ideas about propagation and pest control by sharing personal experiences of what works and doesn't work. This helps further the hobby and increases their enjoyment of owning house plants through positive collaboration with one another. Sounds a lot like the original base of our horticulture professional associations!

Fact is, I believe the health and prosperity of our state and national trade associations, and horticulture non-profit foundations directly correlates with how in-line our industry is with the newest members of its Millennial consumer base. Imagine the potential of our horticulture industry's scholarship programs and philanthropic efforts if we directly involved these non-professional social media groups. Simply sharing our industry's successes of environmental research, conservation and support of formal horticulture education could start the conversation of something BIG.

I would highly encourage ALL hardgoods suppliers, transportation partners, horticulture manufacturing companies, growers, re-wholesalers, retail garden shops (no matter the size), wholesale florists, retail florists, and both landscape nursery growers and landscape professionals to be a part of your horticulture trade association and research foundations. If you make a living in horticulture, then let your voice, your experience and your positive collaboration guide our industry to make the horticulture experience better for the end consumer.

Let's, together, provide that open-air atmosphere where consumers forge a friendship with the professional horticulture industry and get a positive experience from their green goods purchase. We're in this for the long haul!

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