

# GROWERTALKS

## Growers Talk Production

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### Healing Our Country With Plants

*Austin Bryant*

Growing up, I was taught there are consequences for everything. Unfortunately, we rush to think of negative repercussions as caused by some thoughtless action. I try and tell my kids consequences work both ways, emphasizing that good decisions lead to positive results.

Our country made some huge decisions in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. I'm not taking sides on any political aisle or validating the decisions of leaders in their level of pandemic action. Rather, I want to look at the repercussions for our industry as a whole from those decisions; i.e., what has been the cost of social distancing for our communities locally? How do we rebuild better?

Any healthcare professional would agree that healing the body is only a piece of the equation; the mind and psyche must follow. Finding ways to stitch back together socially distanced communities will be a real challenge. However, with any rebuilding project, we have the opportunity to build it back better than before. The horticulture industry needs to be leading the charge in pronouncing and elevating our products as wellness for the mind, body and soul.

I know several organizations who've been doing fantastic work and studies, not only presenting the benefits of plants in people's lives, but also proving it. The NHF (National Horticulture Foundation) provided funding for a graduate assistant, Christine Penman, under the direction of Dr. Charles Guy, through The Wilmot Gardens Restoration Project at Shands Hospital in Gainesville, Florida. The project directly studied the effects of women gardening with plants and how those benefits can be shown through physical brain activity.

Using an fMRI machine that shows contrasting areas of activity in the brain, the study scanned volunteers before and after gardening sessions at Wilmot Gardens. Expected brain activity shown by the fMRI machine correlates with those positive responses on the volunteer's self-awareness surveys, helping to prove gardening reduces anger, agitation, blood pressure, cortisol levels, depression, fatigue, heart rate, pain and STRESS. It likewise increases cognitive function, friendliness, delay of dementia, happiness, self-esteem, mental health and quality of life.

One more program that's just absolutely TOPS, in my opinion, is the Society of American Florist (SAF) "Petal It Forward" program. This is a nationwide event that offers local florists and volunteers the opportunity to give bouquets of flowers out on the street. The real magic of the program is that they give away bouquets in pairs—one for the first person receiving the flowers and one for the recipient to pass on to another family member, friend or stranger. It's no secret how receiving flowers makes you feel and the satisfaction received from making someone feel better.

The most important aspect of this is that it's LOCAL—most likely the florist offering this gift is giving it to a member of their home community. Also, that recipient will be passing along that happiness locally as well. One Petal It

Forward event can provide thousands of pin points of happiness in a single community. This program not only offers the tools, but also the catalyst to reconnect socially distanced families, friends or strangers.

I've never been a socially distance kind of guy. I love interacting with employees, vendors and desperately miss visiting customers and interacting with everyone at trade shows. Most of all, I miss hugs and handshakes. I'm not a fist bump, elbow knock or the rare foot bump kind of guy. Being socially distanced may not have dug deep into the pocket of every grower, but it's definitely taken its toll on how we interact with one another.

The unknown toll of this social distancing phenomena will forever be unknown. The huge waves of demand for plant material far overshadows the small losses social distancing may have caused. A disagreement between a vendor and good customer is quick to mend over a dinner and a drink. However, the rift in our communities and that uneasy feeling of standing within 3 ft. of a neighbor at the grocery store checkout line will be much longer lasting. Plant shop venues are places where people come together to reduce anxiety and stress.

There's a reason why healthy communities are beautifully landscaped and why thriving small town Main Streets have stunning container gardens. It's not because they just have money to burn; it's because the people care about one another and each citizen wants something better for themselves and their neighbor.

This pandemic has given our industry the opportunity to become an integral part of the healing process in this nation, to solidify the importance of horticulture in our home communities. Let's stand and pronounce the proven benefits in wellness that plants provide in our homes and work places. **GT**

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