

GROWERTALKS

Features

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A Good Vibe

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As good as we are at wordsmithing, we're not sure we can paint an adequate picture describing the energy, the enthusiasm and the assortment of ideas, products and networking opportunities that took place during

Cultivate'23, North American horticulture's largest event, which was held July 15-18 in Columbus, Ohio.

The first thing folks tend to ask is attendance numbers, which we're told was about 11,000, so there wasn't much of a lull on the trade show floor other than Tuesday afternoon (always a quiet time). Sunday and Monday were hopping—at all times and in all four corners!

The mood? Absolutely upbeat! We could have forecast that, as spring was great for just about everyone. Attendees had money in their pockets—but did they have their checkbooks out to place orders? Are growers and retailers investing in the future? Or are they keeping their powder dry?

One grower suggested to us that any vendor selling plant material will do well—after all, you have to have seed and liners to produce a finished crop! However, hardgood sellers, especially containers and peat/potting mixes, may find things a bit slow if their customers still have product stockpiled because of the recent supply chain crisis. If you ordered a year in advance and took 18 months' worth of inputs, you may not have run through them all yet.

As for equipment/automation, that sector should do well in coming years because of the ever-increasing cost and scarcity of labor. That is, IF it is a tool or technologies that truly deliver labor-savings. Some of what we saw on the trade show floor was a bit ahead of its time—or just plain odd (strobe lights for supplemental lighting?). But that said, it was a fantastic event that went by in the blink of an eye!

Keynote & Sessions

State of the Industry Keynote

One of the most well-attended talks at AmericanHort's Cultivate event each year is the keynote session on the second day—the annual State of the Industry address featuring the association president and CEO Ken Fisher, governmental and regulatory guru Craig Regelbrugge, and the industry's well-respected chief economist Charlie Hall. As they do every year, each took a high-level look at the industry and offered comments based on their area of expertise.

- We need more workers. Statistics show 1.6 open positions for each unemployed person.

- Consumer spending is in a precarious place, as personal savings rates have fallen to below 2019 levels.
- Climate change impacts like water restrictions in the West are a threat.
- Horticultural research is at risk, due to the continued shrinking of land grant university programs.
- Economic challenges like interest rates, tax issues and regulatory problems can hit us hard. We must protect our interests.

But, on the bright side, in general, our industry is experiencing ebbs and flows, but consumers are buying, landscapers are installing and builders are building.

- Spring 2023 was good for most in our industry, with 76% of growers reporting increased sales from 2022.
- 100% of growers surveyed indicated sales are up compared to 2019.
- Bottom line profit was up for 69% of growers surveyed.
- 78% reported unit sales were up.
- Transaction counts are still up for garden center retailers surveyed, meaning we're keeping some of the new shoppers gained during the pandemic.
- The supply chain seems to be back to normal and forecasts show we can expect input costs to rise about 1.6% in 2024; but costs have risen 22% in the past three years, so if prices aren't increased, profit margins will shrink.
- The U.S. has a historic level of people between the ages of 25 and 35, which bodes well for housing and, in turn, horticulture.
- Excess savings (or "capacity to spend") is still high for middle- and upper-class Americans—your core customers.

Remember, these are just data points gleaned from surveys and reports (and interpreted by intelligent market researchers and industry leaders), and not always hyper-localized to your community, customer base or specific operation. Your reality is local, so watching the trends, participating in local government and staying close to your customer base is always the best plan.

New Products



Cravo's Rain Shelter

For a while, Cravo's retractable-roof greenhouses were the hot ticket! But they aren't for everybody, and Cravo found their niche in protecting fruit orchards and vine crops. However, they haven't forgotten us, and they've launched a new product suited for floriculture called the Auto-Dry Rain Shelter. It can provide rain, hail and frost protection for your field-grown potted (or in-ground) crops. Think of it as a high tunnel that retracts. One motor can operate 50,000 sq. ft. It can be combined with

bird netting or shadecloth for additional protection. There are lots of options for your specific Rain Shelter, including four structure designs and 11 covering choices. Cost is just a couple dollars/sq. ft., said company president and CEO Richard Vollebregt. cravo.com/en

Collate 2L as a drench

A stop by the Fine Americas booth revealed that the PGR Collate 2L (active ingredient ethephon, a.k.a. Florel) will be getting a drench label in Q1 of 2024.

Why drench Collate? More speed, better control and better consistency, they say, especially when applied through booms. Collate is a tool to improve branching (stopping apical dominance) and also for shedding flowers until you want them to form.

While in the Fine booth, we picked up a couple of tips for using ethephon:

- If spray tank water goes above 4.5 pH, product becomes unstable, so add a buffering agent to keep the pH low.
- Ethephon is more effective and longer-lasting when applied at 73F (23C) or below, so in summer, apply in the morning. fine-americas.com



HC Companies Low-Profile Tray

We can't recall the last time someone innovated the lowly shuttle tray, but HC asked growers what they wanted in a tray and growers replied, "Less soil loss, less labor to assemble and less space taken up in the production barn."

The solution was found in a six-pack carrier, which is basically what the Low-Profile Tray looks like. But rather than flexible plastic, this is hard plastic with clips that hold pots in place, plus slots for tags. Fifty of these, with pots, takes up the same space as eight regular shuttle trays with pots. And they're strong! They had some 10-count trays with heavy weighted balloons in each pot and the pots didn't come loose. A video showed a worker carrying four at once and not losing a single pot.

It took two years to work with growers on trial runs to perfect the new low-profile growing tray, which uses 30% less plastic than standard polystyrene trays (this one is made of the more widely recycled polypropylene), according to Mark Hembree, product development manager at The HC Companies.

It addresses multiple issues, like sustainability and labor shortages. These growing trays come pre-assembled with the tag slots pre-oriented to be visible, so there's no labor to put pots into the trays. They feed into any typical pot filler and soil that falls out of the pots is able to be reclaimed versus getting stuck in the bottom of the trays. The product is launching with standard 4-in. pots, but the company is looking to expand the offerings quickly into other sizes and shapes.

What about the end consumer, you ask? Testing at retail showed that consumers figured out the clips quite readily. The biggest obstacle HC faces? "It's different," they answered.

"The response here was absolutely overwhelming," Mark said. He added they would like to work with growers who are interested to make sure it fits well into their processes for the most success. hc-companies.com



Dramm Pipe-Loc Irrigation System

Part of a new DrammOutdoors line of fittings, risers and nozzles for nursery and field-grown crops, the Pipe-Loc Irrigation System is modeled after those giant irrigation pipes and risers you see in the vegetable fields in California. Only smaller and lighter.

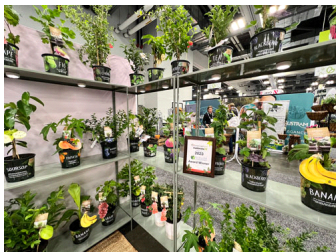
Made from impact-resistant, corrosion-resistant, UV-resistant plastic, Pipe-Loc uses quick latch connectors for easy setup and take-down. Uses standard 1½ in. to 3-in. PVC for main lines and laterals. They offer a line of complimentary sprinklers, too (although it will take any with ½-in. to 1-in. threads. dramm.com)

TTA Cutting Edge Cutting Sticker

We've expected TTA to get into the URC-sticking game for quite some time and now they have. The Cutting Edge cutting sticker is in testing now and will be available for purchase in November.

Cutting Edge uses an off-the-shelf robot arm, and on the surface, it looks like other cutting-sticking robots you've seen in GrowerTalks. However, the gripper, software and vision system are all designed and made in-house.

It's modular, meaning you can connect up to four robots to one computer and belt system, controlled by one operator. The patented gripper dabbles the hole, so trays don't have to be pre-dibbled or you don't have to use the delicate stem as a dibble. And they plan on developing a global library of plants using deep learning, combining the experience of all the machines in the field. Speed is said to be 2,000 plants per hour (some cuttings may be faster, some slower). We'll tell you more about it when they land in some U.S. greenhouses. tta.eu



Dewar Nurseries' Finished Fruit Program

Apopka, Florida-based Dewar catches the shopper's eye three times with their finished fruit program: a printed pot, an informational picture tag and a big picture of the fruit they're buying. Fruits for sale include raspberries, blueberries, bananas, grapes, papaya, guava, soursop, figs and tea plants. dewar.com

Terra Nova's Newest Heuchera

Terra Nova Nurseries caught the eyes of passersby with a beautiful rainbow sweep of their heuchera, from dark purple to rich green and everything in between. They introduced two additional heuchera, including Peach Smoothie, with deep peachy-orange foliage (Berry Smoothie is one of their top-sellers).

But we really dig Changeling, which gives you several colors on one plant. It starts out red, morphs to rust, then turns light green and ages to dark green. If you can't decide which color to buy, just buy Changeling and you get them all! terranovanurseries.com

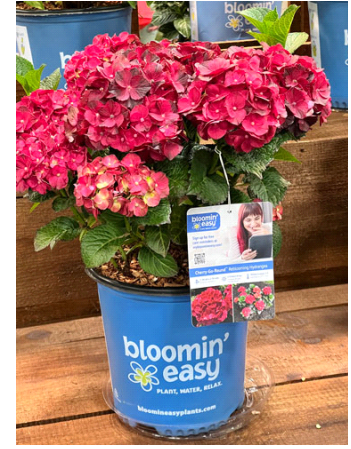




Casa Flora Aubergine Lady Fern

It's been a while since Texas-based fern specialist Casa Flora has introduced a new variety, but the wait was worth it. Aubergine Lady has fronds that start out green, but age to dark eggplant purple. From their own breeding program, they've been working on this one for years, said President Richard Lim, who was beamingly proud. Aubergine Lady will thrive in Zones 4 to 10 (10 if shady and well-watered).

casaflora.com/products/ferns



Van Belle's Bloomin' Easy Cherry Go Round Bigleaf Hydrangea

What an amazing color! This is a compact, reblooming variety that grows to just 2- to 3-ft. tall and wide. The deep red blooms are held on thick and sturdy stems. Zones 5 to 9. bloomineasywholesale.com



Boa Fang's Compostable Ties

Compostable and adjustable zip ties from Boa Fang have no wires and no plastics—nothing that won't break down to nothing in a year or two. Customers are looking for sustainable products like these!

The very enthusiastic gentleman we spoke to about the product sees this being used in a number of ways. His main emphasis is the tree nursery/orchard/vineyard market where tying up branches to trellising is a laborious affair. These zip ties also come in a roll that can be inserted into a tie-dispensing gun for speedier application. He tells me he's adept enough at tying these that he can keep up with a gun!

But the consumer gardening market is another place that can benefit from the Boa Fang, such as tying tomato vines to stakes or supporting rose vines. Gardeners don't want non-degradable stuff accumulating on and in their soil. These will be gone within a year. For nurseries that need a tie that sticks around a bit longer, he has a product that's coated with a vegetable-based film that will last through the elements for about two years before breaking down. He told me they have "a 10-lb. strength," and while we wouldn't suspend ourselves from a steel beam with these ties, they do seem strong. boafang.com

BioCeres GR from Anatis

As the use of biocontrols in greenhouses increases, growers are looking for more products to try, and BioCeres GR is another tool in the toolbox. The folks at Anatis say it's the first granular bioinsecticide created from a strain of the beneficial fungus *Beauveria bassiana* on the North American market. Working its magic five to seven days after application, it controls soil-dwelling insect pests, including root aphids, shoreflies and western flower thrips. (It works for turf, too.)

Anatis also introduced BioCeres EC at Cultivate, which is an oil-based bioinsecticide for hydroponic and CEA growers. This is the company's third product on the market—BioCeres WP has been available from BioSafe since it was introduced in 2014. anatisbioprotection.com



SunGro's 5-kg Coir Bricks

With the acquisition of Pelemix USA and Pelemix Mexico, SunGro is now the exclusive distributor in North America for the brand, which offers 5-kg bricks of coir substrates, as well as ready-to-use options, like the grow bags for hydroponic crops like tomatoes, cucumbers, berries and cannabis. They're available now for ordering.

The 5-kg bricks are shipped in bulk and can be mixed with other raw materials. They're available in natural washed, extra washed (with low EC levels) or treated (buffered in calcium nitrate). The ready-to-use options can just be opened and planted in. All sizes of the grow bag option are also available in a biodegradable non-woven fabric.

SunGro's website also has an option to contact Grower Specialists for technical questions: [sungro.com](https://www.sungro.com) GT