

GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Business

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The Biggest Party of the Year is in January

Art Parkerson



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How many green-shrub growers does it take to fill a convention center in Baltimore? Whatever the number, you can see them all at MANTS, which has quietly become the can't-miss national winter trade show for the green industry.

I own a Mid-Atlantic nursery, so the Mid-Atlantic Nursery Trade Show (MANTS) is naturally my thing. (Stop by and say hello to me in my booth!) But why will you go? What attracts a succulent grower from California or a greenhouse operator from Chicago?

It's not the thousands of green shrubs, is it? It can't be the education sessions—there aren't any. It certainly ain't the "charm" of the city.

What makes MANTS unique? It's one big party. Everybody's in the same room for the entire time, and the energy that creates is pretty incredible. Emotionally, MANTS is where spring begins.

For me, it feels a bit like a family reunion. Nobody pinches my cheeks anymore, but most folks want to talk about my family more than they do my business.

"How's your dad? Have any more kids this year?" For those who grew up going to these trade shows, the problem with MANTS is the same as the problem with family reunions—you're supposed to know who everyone is. Thank the Lord for name tags! I have a sneaky strategy: my name badge says, "Arthur." If someone calls me, "Art," it means I'm supposed to know this person from way back. If they call me "Arthur," I peg them for a carpet-bagger.

If you're not a MANTS old-timer (if I say, "orange blazer" and it means nothing to you, then you're new to MANTS), it might not feel like a reunion, but you'll feel the electricity of the biggest party of the year. Picture it like a giant college kick-off. Can you see all those kids swarming onto campus, getting back together with old friends and asking, "How was your summer?" and meeting new kids—"What's your major?" It's fun because you've done it all before and everyone knows just what to do and what to say. There's a reason the dance floor is empty until the DJ plays the Electric Slide.

Instead of undergrads tapping kegs, we're middle-aged plant people stuffing tote bags. Everybody will be asking the same questions. I know this because they ask the same questions every year. "How's labor? How was your year? How does spring look?"

Customers always begin with the line, “What’s new?”

It’s the same every time, so failure to have a response is a major fumble. My sales team must have a good answer prepared. It shouldn’t be a surprise.

But I also want my salespeople to know that it’s the wrong question. I doubt we have a single customer who buys from us because of “what’s new.” If we had nothing new at all—if we handed out a brochure that said, “Screw new! We’ve got all the same stuff for 2024!”—they would still buy from us. Our customers choose us because of what we’ve always done and will continue to do, which is to consistently provide quality landscape plants. Yes, those green shrubs! MANTS is full of them: boxwood, ilex, Juniperus.

The most important question—the one everyone will be asking—is what’s in store for 2024? Some people ask it directly: “What do you see in your crystal ball for this year?” Others beat around the bush: “How were your spring bookings?” The quiet ones lurk for answers, silently collecting and tabulating availability sheets. Some folks just look at prices; if they’re up, the market is strong.

But by the time you get to the party that is MANTS, it’s already too late to do much about early spring. It’s too late to change your production numbers. It’s too late to change prices. It’s too late to change your labor strategy. All of us growers have already placed our bets. Like the gamblers we are, we try our best to project confidence to each other, but inevitably someone will say, “It will all be okay ... so long as the weather cooperates.”

Who can argue with that? Clear weekends are clearly rocket fuel. Dark and stormy Saturdays in May are nightmares. But what point is there in wishing for good weather? Luck be a lady tonight. She loves me; she loves me not.

Our reliance on Mother Nature’s finicky kindness is nothing new. And the anticipation of what’s in store—be it founded in fear or in faith—is the whole point of the party. See you there! **GT**

Art Parkerson works at Lancaster Farms, a wholesale nursery in Suffolk, Virginia. He’s also the creative director of PLANTPOP, a horticultural cinema studio that makes documentary films about people and plants. To say hello, write to art@lancasterfarms.com.