

Words to Grow By

| Staff

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2007 Young Grower Award

Fifteen forward-thinking Young Grower Award candidates plot our industry's future

If you think there are no energetic, enthusiastic young people coming into our industry, think again. They're out there, working hard for you—or maybe competing against you in their own businesses. We took the time this winter, with your help, to track down the cream of the young grower crop for *GrowerTalks* third Young Grower Award, which is open to any grower aged 35 and under.

You sent in nominations from all over: Connecticut, Maryland and New Jersey; Ohio and Iowa, Michigan and Minnesota, Oregon and Washington, Florida and South Carolina. Some of our Young Grower Award nominees are industry veterans in their mid-30s with established careers. Others are fresh from college and just beginning their adventures in horticulture. One is still in high school!

But despite their differences, they all hold important, responsible positions at their businesses. They've all shown a passion for the industry. And they've all got good ideas about their futures, and the future of floriculture.

Which leads to this article: From these 15 nominees, we'll pick five finalists who'll travel to OFA's Short Course in July, where we'll announce our winner. As part of the selection process, we asked all the nominees to answer an important industry question: "What do we need to do to make our industry more exciting to today's consumers?" We thought it would be interesting to get some Gen-X views on a question that's plaguing all of us.

Their answers are below. We ran them in the order in which they sent them in (rewarding the ability to meet a deadline). Congrats to all of them for being nominated!—*Chris Bytes, Editor*

“What do we need to do to make our industry more exciting to today's consumers?”

Aaron Bivens

Head Grower/Production manager

Tanasacres Nursery

Portland, Oregon

Age: 28

We all know that today's consumers are starved for time and inundated with stimuli—MP3 players, the Internet, blogs, MySpace and more. I think we need to follow that trend and use it to create excitement in plants and gardening.

One way to do this would be to set up a blog for your greenhouse. You could set up a real-time or a time-lapse Webcast of a crop growing in the greenhouse. The grower could post a general culture schedule of when the crop was propagated, transplanted, spaced and so on. They could give a history of the cultivation of the plant and its uses. Consumers could check on the progress of the crop and watch it grow. The

grower could then advertise when that crop will be sold and at what store.

This could work great for poinsettias, for example. If you are a grower/retailer you could presell your poinsettias in the summer, Webcast their production, and have a week when the customers can come pick their poinsettia directly out of the greenhouse. Even large retailers could use this and advertise the Web site in their weekly ads and at their stores. It would be an interesting way of educating the consumer about what goes into growing plants, while connecting with them through technology.

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Michael Maran

Head Grower

Gedert's Greenhouse

Maumee, Ohio

Age: 35

Today's consumer wants a product that will perform. For example, will the plant really tolerate drought and still grow full of color? Many of today's producers are forced to grow plants tighter together to conserve space to meet higher production numbers. Current production costs such as labor, fuel and greenhouse structures have risen to astonishing levels, making the use of growth retardants necessary to produce more plant material in less space.

Often, the use of these chemicals affects the finished product so dramatically that the consumer does not get to see the full potential of the plants they purchased. The consumer then feels the poor performance is their fault and becomes discouraged. In many cases it's easier to drench or spray a growth retardant to control growth, without considering the impact it has on the garden performance of the plant for the consumer.

The consumer needs to feel successful in order to have the confidence to continue to grow more plants. Using techniques such as DIF, effective scheduling and proper irrigation can give the producer the quality needed and demanded by today's gardeners. Maybe bigger is better?

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Chris Meyer

Propagation/Greenhouse Manager

Walters Gardens

Zeeland, Michigan

Age: 33

I believe we must continue to introduce new varieties, through hybridizing or selecting new sports, to keep a high level of interest in the plant industry. I also think that we must continue to raise the bar for acceptable quality of product—product that is healthy, disease free and virus free for the consumer's garden, and that will grow to its full potential with minimal effort by the consumer. Young growers need to combine the knowledge of experienced growers and propagators with the new ideas and technologies available to the industry today.

As growers of wholesale perennials, we need to continue looking at new machinery for increasing production efficiencies while lowering production costs, yet maintaining acceptable profit margins. As propagators, we need to constantly be aware of new techniques for rooting plants efficiently in order to keep costs as low as possible and maintain a fair price for the consumer. By utilizing new techniques, such as Ellegaard machines and sticking lines for cuttings, the technology driven generation of today will continue to make new and exciting advances in the industry for the future. As consumers, families can introduce their children to gardening as a fun and educational hobby.

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Kevin Cook

Production Manager/Head Grower

Meadowridge, Inc.

Zeeland, Michigan

Age: 34

Today's consumers are technical, visual, sophisticated and fast-paced. This is obvious in every aspect of life, even in gardening. People want instant gratification and to keep up with the latest trends. Our job, as an industry, is to meet people where they are. We have to develop products that are appealing to their needs. This may mean shifting from the traditional "do it yourself" bedding flats to a more modern container already filled with the latest and greatest plants, using a value-added approach. It may also mean using computer technology to "hand" our consumers a beautiful garden without them getting their hands dirty. We have to appeal to both the person who plants 20 flats by hand every year and to the person who wants a 20-ft. container full of a huge variety of plants dropped off at the back left corner of her elaborate yard at 10:45 a.m. on Friday. We cannot put a price on time these days. Therefore, we have to develop a great product, and package it in a way that it sells itself. We can make our industry more exciting to people by daring to try new things and by being willing to experiment.

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Keith Bemerer

Assistant Grower

West Hills Greenhouse

Cincinnati, Ohio

Age: 25

Green and black flower pots are outdated; geraniums are a plant of the past. The tradition of planting on Mother's Day weekend has been moved to the beginning of Daylight Savings Time. Is this where our industry is headed? To make our industry more exciting and inviting to all levels of consumers, we must change and adapt to new industry ideas, while maintaining the standards and production we have achieved.

Large retail stores have made parts of the industry much less personable, and have infused consumers with misinformation regarding plant choice, color schemes, growing material and planting schedules. These trends can be reversed with a more hands-on approach to consumers on all levels, as well as the introduction of newer, more vibrant color selections, easy-to-maintain products and cost-effective environment-friendly materials. Vivid pots, geraniums mated with tropical bananas, and crops ready for mom and the vernal equinox will encourage senses of both the young and the old.

Setting the industry into a more market-friendly environment will also encourage all ages to be excited about planting. Enticing consumers into the latest trends, plunging into alternative growing concepts, and providing realistic factual education will drive our industry for years to come.

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Josh Bell

Grower Coordinator

Garden State Growers

Pittstown, New Jersey

Age: 24

To make our products more exciting to consumers, I believe we must listen to the consumer, be willing to rapidly change to accommodate their needs, and consistently deliver the highest quality product possible.

Is our industry driving new plants and ideas or are consumers? To excite today's consumer, we should involve them directly. The use of

focus groups, direct greenhouse interaction and participation in field trials would help us learn what excites them. Many in the health care and food industry have used this approach to identify what the end user wants.

Learning what excites the consumer could likely cause us to change our methods of operation. Our industry typically does not embrace change well. Those who are willing to accept change and adapt rapidly are more likely to succeed.

In our industry, quality sells. To keep the consumer excited, we must deliver consistent high-quality product. The instant appeal of superior quality is always a winner.

I believe if our industry wants to excite the consumer, we can achieve this goal as other industries have. We must be willing to listen to our consumers, adapt our methods to exceed their expectations, and consistently deliver the highest quality product available.

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Bryce Johnson

Assistant Production Manager/General Manager

Red Oak Greenhouse

Red Oak, Iowa

Age: 31

We need to not only produce a quality product; we need to show the consumer how the product is beautiful as well as beneficial to our health. In today's marketplace people have gone health crazy; for example, you see organic foods and/or natural foods in the supermarket, commercials for gyms and exercise equipment on TV, and so on. This is why we need to educate the consumer on how the plants can cleanse the air, making it healthier for all of us. What a great way to promote plants by suggesting that the healthy plant you're buying is not only beautiful, it is also an air purifier for the entire family.

Instead of trying to cheapen the product by cutting corners, we should educate the consumer on what a quality product is, and then include information on the health benefits of plants. The milk industry promoted the slogan "Got Milk?" as an advertising campaign that showed famous people drinking milk for the health benefits. We could run a similar campaign, but instead of milk we would be promoting the health benefits of plants. If our industry could show the consumer a quality product along with the health benefits of plants, then the consumer will become more excited with their plant purchase.

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John R. Bonner

General Manager

Eagle Creek Wholesale

Mantua, Ohio

Age: 29

Today's consumer is not our mother's mother. This industry, like many other consumer-centric industries, is selling to people who place more value on individualism than ever. Today's generation wants to be different.

The green initiative taking place is a great opportunity to engage today's environmentally conscious consumer. They are passionate about it and it is something they will act on with their wallets.

At the retail level, there is a great opportunity to connect with the individual with the broadest variety mix ever. New varieties on the patio further accentuate the individual and outdoor living environments, offering a great opportunity for consumers to showcase their originality. Cooking with fresh ingredients is also a channel today's consumer can identify with.

In short, our industry needs to transform gardening from a pastime in the spring to something that is a part of the fabric of everyday living year round. Plants need to be an extension of each individual. Our industry needs to get past the hobby mentality and convey the message that plants are an integral part of living.

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Jimmy Seemann

Owner

The Gardens Wholesale Nursery

Dade City, Florida

Age: 17

One thing that I feel would cause consumers to be more excited about our industry is to make them more aware of what our industry offers. Before our family got into the business, nurseries were something that we saw as uninviting; not somewhere you could actually get ideas for your own yard.

If we could allow consumers to see the final results, by maybe having sample theme gardens within our nurseries—some for people who like quiet places to go, such as a butterfly garden; a backyard paradise for entertaining; or a place to take you away from the city, allowing you to enjoy the country within your own yard. Working with our environment to bring in wildlife, natural shade and a place to enjoy more time at home causes us to be more conscience of our environment, giving back to it, as well as spending more time with our families.

Another way is by allowing local Garden Clubs, FFA, 4-H and other groups tour our businesses. You could also have one day a month that you allow consumers in, having landscapers on hand to help them set up their own yards, while walking through our nursery theme gardens.

This would be an example of agri-tourism, making our industry more exciting to today's consumers.

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Corey Hill

Grower

Skagit Gardens

Mount Vernon, Washington

Age: 29

Consumer excitement brings two words to mind: "new" and "improved." Our industry can harness the excitement created by the constant new introductions and improved traits the breeders and researchers are providing. This will help translate the positive changes to the end consumer, so they know how the new has been improved.

Did you ever wonder why the general public doesn't recognize the names of the worlds greatest plant breeders and selectors? You would think gardeners would be waiting for the next great plant introductions like they do the next John Grisham novel. With all the buzz and excitement before a plant becomes available to the consumer, why doesn't it translate to the end consumer?

When new plants show up in supplier catalogs, and are touted as breakthroughs, their virtues need to be announced to the end consumer. Garden centers can inform their customers why the new is improved. This exchange of information creates anticipation of the special feeling all gardeners get when they're successful.

After all, what we're really trying to create is the feeling of success, the excitement of a first flower, or a winter dormancy turning into spring emergence. As long as the industry continues to bring new and improved product to market, excitement shall follow.

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Brad Stowe

Head Grower

Hi Cotton Greenhouses

St Matthews, South Carolina

Age: 25

To make our industry more exciting to today's consumers we must be concerned with quality plant material. The greenhouse industry is too concerned with marketing ploys and branding, and we've gotten away from true performers. Plants should be chosen for their ability to perform all season long, remain disease and pest free, and be care free. This will make the consumer a better gardener and, more importantly, a repeat buyer. Too many times the consumer is turned off by unsuccessful gardening. With some knowledge and XXXXX, gardening isn't that difficult. Marketing and branding of plants is only as good as the plant itself.

Growers can make our industry more exciting at independent garden centers and box stores if we provide them with the necessary knowledge of how to care for plants. If the plants are taken care of at the garden centers, they'll be more likely to perform in the landscape. We must also train garden center personnel with the knowledge of how the consumer should take care of their plants when they get them home. Cultural information is vital to ensure a plant performs in the landscape.

Plants are the backbone of our industry. Our industry is only as exciting as our plants. So the next time a plant variety is introduced to the public, let's make sure it's a performer.

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Yudisne "Judy" Albano

Assistant Head Grower

Bell Nursery

Burtonsville, Maryland

Age: 35

Our industry can promote consumer interest in various ways, one of which lies in marketing strategies. In the short term, we can impact customers with colorful and beautiful innovative products, providing variety throughout the year. We should promote the idea of having a garden as a piece of art, including plants that accent interior decoration. With consumer research and feedback, we can better understand the needs and purchasing power of today's consumers.

For the long term, we can educate current and future customers of all ages and origins. Scientists have found that having plants around brings peace of mind, health and harmony into life. Ancient philosophies, such as feng shui, also rely on these ideas. With customers now more interested in their health and in the environment, we are seeing more and more organic and recycled products filling stores' shelves. Also, in the real estate market, mature landscapes and gardens are often a positive selling point. Furthermore, for most people, gardens are an important part of their homes. Customers like to live with a beautiful garden as well as a beautiful kitchen.

We should take advantage of, build on and promote these fresh new concepts of health and environmental awareness via our marketing strategies and education.

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Greg Mitchell

Production Manager

Stacy's Greenhouses

York, South Carolina

Age: 33

There are at least two subjects that need to be addressed here: education and marketing.

Education: A lot of folks out there know the basics; however a lot of people don't know that some plants need special attention during certain times of the year. This information is out there but it needs to be more accessible. Some retailers are addressing this using Web sites and POP material, so we're moving in the right direction. In my own encounters, I've heard several people say they are giving up because they've had a bad experience with losing plants. We need to let them know that there's nothing wrong with that.

Marketing: Without getting too specific, we need to show people that gardening and landscaping can be fun and therapeutic. I've noticed that there are a lot of beautiful photos of beautiful plants in beautiful pots ... but where are the people who put them there? One thing we could do to spice things up is to show people having fun while landscaping and enjoying the finished product after completion.

We also need to make our marketing more mainstream. I'm thinking something similar to the branding partnerships out there now; maybe something like what the dairy industry did with milk—not a representation of one brand, but a representation of our product and the benefits provided.

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Matthew Miller

Head Grower

Malmborg's Greenhouse

Rogers, Minnesota

Age: 30

Most of today's retail shoppers have little knowledge of anything plant related. I think we as an industry need to be able to simplify our products for today's customers. Today's consumers have more toys, more work, less time and smaller gardens, if any at all. So, our products need to be exciting and we need to offer outstanding customer service.

I have always liked to see what a product looks like when it's in use, so have a display area. Give the customer an idea of how to incorporate different plant material into their landscape or their balcony. It doesn't have to be big, but it has to catch their eye.

Use the organic theme. Incorporate it in our message to consumers. We can improve the environment with our plant material. Plants help improve the air we breathe.

Use the Internet and other media besides radio and newspaper to promote your product. Many people have multiple electronic devices. Work at advertising through them.

Offer new and exciting products. Breeders are continually developing new and improved breeding. Offer these new varieties and improvements to your customers and make a big deal about them.

As long as consumers have disposable income we need to get them to buy plant material. Let's get their attention and get them interested.

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Chris Hart

Greenhouse Production and Distribution Manager

Hart's Greenhouse and Florist

Canterbury, Connecticut

Age: 23

Today's consumer is seeking plant material that's vibrant and fresh, as well as reliable and easy to use. The industry has been quick to come out with many new plants and varieties to satisfy the demand for new and different colors, patterns, shapes and textures. These

introductions each year also appeal to the consumer's desire for plants that perform more reliably with less maintenance.

Given the multitude of varieties available, it's our responsibility to select those that are of genuine value to the buyer. In order to remain interesting and exciting to the consumer it's necessary to achieve balance between variety and simplicity. Rather than offering a sampling of, say, six new pink impatiens varieties, we should, as growers, stand by just one or two of these new choices, thus making it less confusing to our customers. With a more focused selection, it becomes easier to guide the consumer to the right product (through packaging and branding) for his or her needs, making the whole experience all the more enjoyable. By limiting the number of plant varieties we grow, we are also ensuring that each of those varieties can be showcased as unique and useful.

Even in the green industry, the old saying is true: "less is more." In order to remain exciting to the consumer, we need to provide them with a few plants with a purpose, rather than a plethora of repeats.

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