

# HORTICULTURAL INDUSTRIES Leadership Awards



Supplement to the July 2023 issues of:

**Greenhouse**  
MANAGEMENT

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# PERFECT YOUR PROGRAM WITH POSTIVA

Complete your disease management strategy with the unique formulation in Postiva™ fungicide.



**Powered by two active ingredients (FRAC groups 3+7)**, making it an excellent addition to disease management programs.




**Rapidly absorbed into plant tissue** creating a rainfast barrier of protection to prevent infection and disease progression.



**Provides long-lasting control of Fusarium, powdery mildew, Botrytis, leaf spots, black spot and rust**, as well as suppression of certain bacterial diseases.

**Learn more at [GreenCastOnline.com/Postiva](https://www.GreenCastOnline.com/Postiva)**

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 **Postiva**<sup>®</sup>  
Fungicide

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# Congratulations to the CLASS OF 2023

**S** yngenta is proud to honor all the ornamental professionals who continue to make this industry successful through steadfast commitment and passion.

For the seventh consecutive year, we are excited to partner with *Greenhouse Management* and *Nursery Management* to recognize some of the extraordinary individuals who have made significant achievements in the horticulture industry. These recipients were nominated by their peers because they have demonstrated exceptional leadership and dedication while positively impacting their customers, businesses and the industry.

#### **Congratulations to the Class of 2023 Horticultural Industries Leadership Award winners:**

- Marcel Boonekamp, Green Circle Growers
- Mark and Jolly Krautmman, Heritage Seedlings
- Ed Overvest, Overvest Nurseries
- Jennifer Moss, Moss Greenhouses
- Zach Herrill, United Plant Growers
- Shawn Cox, Arizona Wholesale Growers

To keep up with this fast-paced industry and continue serving your needs, we are working diligently to develop new solutions and tools, expand product labels and enhance our agronomic programs.

In 2022 we introduced Postiva™, a unique broad-spectrum, long-lasting fungicide that combines ADEPIDYN® technology in FRAC Group 7 and *difenoconazole* in FRAC Group 3 to control difficult diseases like *Fusarium*, leaf spots, Botrytis, powdery mildew and more. Since then, we've been thrilled to hear how this innovation has helped growers protect their crop

investments through challenging environmental conditions, significantly reduced disease pressure and even helped them transition away from older, less effective chemistries.

We're excited to share those stories with you in this issue and even more on [GreenCastOnline.com/Postiva](https://www.syngenta.com/greenCastOnline.com/Postiva).

In addition, we are continuing to drive innovation in a number of areas to continue delivering value for ornamental growers. Stop by the Syngenta booth, #1425, at Cultivate to learn more.

We have updated several of our agronomic programs to help you manage common pests that affect poinsettias, spring bedding plants, mums, roses and more. These programs are thoroughly researched for effectiveness and resistance management, and feature some of our most trusted products, including Mainspring® GNL insecticide, and Mural®, Postiva and Segovis® fungicides.

Lastly, to help greenhouse and nursery operations maximize profitability, we have enhanced our GreenTrust® 365 program to provide the best savings on our portfolio all year. Look for new information to come in just a few weeks.

Again, congratulations to the recipients of the 2023 Horticultural Industries Leadership Awards! Thank you for the vital role you play in growing strong and beautiful plants. 🌱

### Tripp Trotter

Head of Marketing, *Turf and Ornamental*, Syngenta  
Syngenta

# How to Perfect YOUR PROGRAM

Protect your crops from invading pathogens using the latest fungicide technology from Syngenta.

**P**rotecting plants against various diseases that can infect them is critical for successful production, indoors or outdoors. However, with the many diseases that can harm your plants, protecting them can prove challenging.

Some of the most difficult-to-control diseases in greenhouse and nursery operations are Botrytis, soilborne diseases such as *Fusarium*, and bacterial diseases caused by *Pseudomonas* spp. and *Xanthomonas* spp. Unrooted cuttings and young seedlings generally require high humidity to root into the planting media. Unfortunately, this warm, humid environment also provides optimal conditions for these pathogenic spores to germinate, invading wounds and tender plant tissue.

**Postiva™ fungicide** from Syngenta is an excellent choice for growers looking for a powerful, long-lasting solution for disease control and prevention.

## BOTRYTIS

“Botrytis blight, or gray mold, is one of the most common diseases that affects ornamental plants,” says Melissa Barron, ornamental market manager at Syngenta.

It is most problematic in the spring and late fall as it thrives in cool, humid environments. This disease is caused by the fungus *Botrytis cinerea* — an opportunistic pathogen that can invade and colonize living and dead plant tissue. It is particularly threatening to newly propagated material like germinated seedlings and unrooted cuttings. Plants that have been or will be boxed, stored or transported are also highly susceptible because humidity and ethylene levels contribute to plant stress and susceptibility. Initial infections result in water-soaked spots on foliage and flowers. Once

established, gray mold can quickly spread throughout the crop and production area.

This threat is a far-reaching one, too, as, “Almost all plants are susceptible to Botrytis,” according to Dr. Ann Chase of Chase Agricultural Consulting.

## FUSARIUM

Growers often discover *Fusarium* infections too late because it goes undetected until root and crown damage has already started to occur.

“Notoriously hard to control, *Fusarium* infections begin in the soil and move upward in the stem, often delaying when growers first notice this disease,” says Barron. “While *Fusarium* may not be an annual threat, it is very difficult to manage and can cause significant damage.”

To stay ahead of the infection, growers must protect susceptible ornamental crops before symptoms are visible. *Fusarium* wilt,

caused by *Fusarium oxysporum*, occurs more frequently when plants are stressed. Therefore, it is important to pay close attention to proper growing practices and environmental conditions. As the crops develop, growers should monitor for signs of one-sided wilt because the pathogen typically invades one side of the vascular system. Infections will also make foliage in sections of the canopy appear lighter in color and cause wilting from the bottom up.

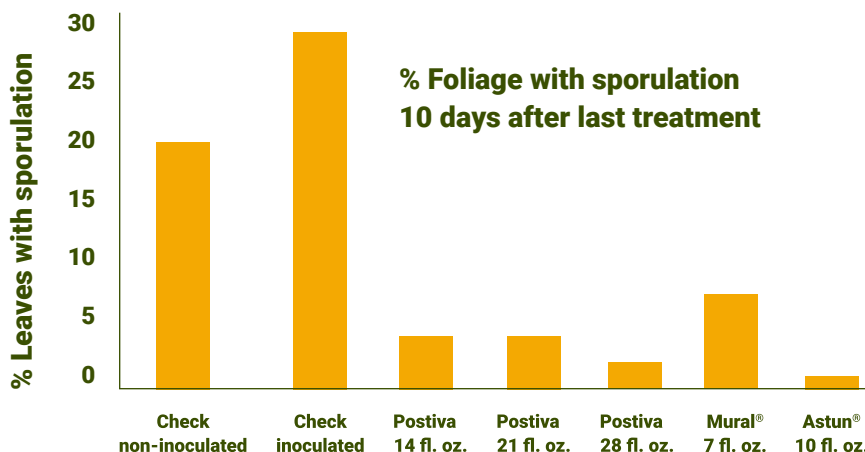
To complicate the issue, “The [*Fusarium*] fungus is a saprophyte as well as a pathogen,” says Chase. “It does not have to be infecting a plant to survive and make spores. It can also be very broad in the range of plants it can attack. These reasons make it hard to kill since it can live under many conditions.”

Like Botrytis, you have to keep an eye out for *Fusarium* on a lot of crops. “Many plants are susceptible to *Fusarium*, including cyclamen, gladiolus (and other bulb crops), cacti and succulents, dipladenia, and some tropical plants like dracaenas and snake plants to name a few,” says Chase.

## BACTERIAL LEAF SPOT

Bacterial leaf spot pathogens such as *Pseudomonas* spp. and *Xanthomonas* spp. typically do not pose a serious threat to the overall health of the plant, but they can negatively affect the overall appearance. Warmer temperatures, along with misting in propagation or rainfall and nightly dew,

## Control of Botrytis on Geranium Pinto™ Premium Pink



Treatments applied on 9/6 and 9/13. Plants inoculated on 9/9. Rates listed per 100 gal. 2019 – Hausbeck and Harlan, MSU

## CONTROL OF *FUSARIUM* WILT (*FUSARIUM OXYSPORUM*) ON GARDEN MUMS 28 DAYS AFTER INOCULATION

Inoculated control



Postiva 28 fl. oz.



create optimal conditions for bacterial leaf spots to develop. Bacterial leaf spots can hide in the lower and interior canopy of plants at first before spreading to the outer portions of the foliage. This can occur because of wet foliage, reduced air movement and higher relative humidity. Bacterial leaf spots initially appear as water-soaked spots that are more angular in shape. This tissue will eventually turn dark and have a greasy appearance while also displaying a yellow border around the lesion.

Like *Fusarium* and Botrytis, bacterial leaf spots can threaten many different plants. “Bacterial leaf spots are too broad a group to list what plants are susceptible,” Chase explains. “There are many different species of *Xanthomonas*, *Pseudomonas*, *Acidovorax* and others in this category.”

Luckily, growers have an effective tool to deal with these pervasive threats: Postiva fungicide.

### THE POSTIVA DIFFERENCE

Compared to other fungicides, Postiva has some key, unique traits. “Postiva contains two active ingredients, ADEPIDYN® technology plus *difenoconazole*, which makes this combination unique to the ornamental market in FRAC Groups 7 and 3,” says Barron.

In fact, emphasized Chase, Postiva “is the only fungicide currently labeled with a FRAC 3 and FRAC 7.” Additionally, Postiva is broad-spectrum, with Chase adding that it is “very safe on a wide variety of crops.” Furthermore, Barron says the fungicide “provides a much-needed missing link in fungicide programs by offering incredibly long-lasting protection against many of the most challenging ornamental diseases.”

Postiva delivers results, with Barron describing the brand’s performance in trials against Botrytis, *Fusarium* and bacterial leaf spots using one word: “Outstanding.”

“In trials and in the hands of growers, Postiva has demonstrated a comprehensive plant protection treatment against fungal and bacterial pathogens,” Barron elaborates.

Likewise, Chase sees “excellent, safe, broad-spectrum control of a wide range of foliar and soilborne diseases” when Postiva is used. “It has been effective on fungal leaf spots, as well as some bacterial leaf spots,” she explains.

Treatments applied on 9/18 & 10/2 with 100 mL of Postiva over the top of plant.  
Ten single plant replicates. Rates per 100 gal.  
2019 - Norman, University of Florida

“Postiva has proven to control *Fusarium* more consistently than other available treatments,” says Barron. “Postiva offers outstanding efficacy and long-lasting control of *Fusarium* spp. by delivering multiple active ingredients in a cost-effective format.”

Chase concurs, saying, “I have never seen anything as effective on *Fusarium* diseases as Postiva.”

### PREVENTION – THE BEST CURE

When it comes to managing damaging diseases such as bacterial leaf spots, there’s one primary concern: preventing them from happening in the first place. “Because there are no curative products on the market for bacterial leaf spots, I believe growers will agree with me that prevention is extremely important,” Barron says.

Chase echoes Barron’s comments. “Preventive is always more effective than curative,” she explains. “If you use the right product before disease occurs, you can often use a lower rate and minimize applications. Treating preventively is always more cost-effective than curative.”

So, does Postiva do a great job in suppressing bacterial spots? Yes. “I’m pleased to share that we have seen excellent suppression of bacterial pathogens caused by *Xanthomonas* spp. and *Pseudomonas* spp. with Postiva,” Barron says. “Growers now have an innovative tool for helping keep bacterial infections out of production.”

### ROTATING FUNGICIDES FOR BEST RESULTS

The unique combination of active ingre-

redients in Postiva and their complementary strengths, also make it an excellent rotation partner to diversify disease control programs.

“Not only does Postiva provide strong protection and reliable control of diseases, but when used in rotation with Mural®, Palladium® and Daconil® brand fungicides, you’re getting comprehensive, powerful, season-long disease prevention,” says Barron. “Postiva is an excellent rotation partner to diversify programs for more comprehensive and broader-spectrum control. There are so many benefits of adding Postiva to an agronomic program: powerful active ingredients, broadened spectrum of disease control, custom ratios for targeting key diseases and timings, and flexible application methods fit for any operation.”

Such rotation is important for preventing resistance development. “Botrytis has high risk for developing fungicide resistance, so it is important to follow a rotation program that includes different modes of action,” Barron explains.

“Using fungicides in the same FRAC Group without rotation leads to resistance development in the fungi or bacteria,” Chase adds. “Then the entire FRAC Group won’t be effective — not just the fungicide that was over-used.”

Another piece of advice from Chase: “Never use a lower-than-labeled rate since that also leads to resistance development.”

### FLEXIBLE APPLICATION TO YOUR PLANTS

On top of all the advantages of using

Postiva to protect crops from pathogens, yet another advantage is the flexibility that Postiva offers, which is one of its greatest strengths. Postiva is labeled for use in greenhouses, nurseries (including field- and container-grown plants and conifer nurseries), as well as residential and commercial landscapes and interior plantscapes.

“Growers can apply it as a spray, including aerial application, drench, chemigation and through automated cold fogging in

greenhouses,” Barron says. Postiva also moves quickly into the wax layer of the plant, creating a reliable, rainfast barrier of protection.

“With a wide range of application rates, Postiva can be applied on many ornamental crops — such as cut flowers, bulb crops and evergreens — as well as pot and bedding plants, foliage plants, ornamental trees and shrubs, succulents, non-bearing fruit and nut plants, and more,”

Barron adds. “We see excellent plant safety and tank-mix compatibility with Postiva, as well.” Considering how many different kinds of plants that *Fusarium*, *Botrytis* and leaf spots threaten, this flexibility is crucial.

“A colleague here at Syngenta likes to say, ‘if you start clean, you stay clean’, and I couldn’t agree more,” Barron says. “Our motto for Postiva is ‘Perfecting Your Program,’ and I cannot think of a better way to describe it.”

## Postiva: Features, Benefits, Disease Control and Application Flexibility

### Features:

- Active Ingredients: *Pydiflumetofen* (FRAC Group 7), *Difenoconazole* (FRAC Group 3)
- Features a combination unique to the ornamental market
- Rapidly absorbed into plant tissue creating a rainfast barrier of protection, preventing infection and disease progression
- Bacterial disease suppression (*Pseudomonas* spp. and *Xanthomonas* spp.)
- Applications can be made by spray, drench, chemigation or cold fogging

### Benefits:

- Excellent rotation partner to diversify programs for more comprehensive and broader-spectrum control
- Outstanding efficacy and long-

lasting control of *Fusarium* spp., powdery mildews and leaf spot diseases

- Provides a powerful plant protection treatment against fungal and bacterial pathogens.
- Flexible application methods fit for any operation

### Foliar and soilborne disease control

Postiva delivers long-lasting protection against the most challenging foliar and soilborne diseases, such as:

- Botrytis
- Powdery mildews
- Black spot
- Leaf spots, including Anthracnose, Alternaria, Cercospora, Septoria spp.
- *Fusarium*, *Rhizoctonia*, *Sclerotinia* spp.

- Rusts
- Boxwood blight
- Bacterial disease (suppression)

### Application flexibility

Postiva can be applied on ornamental crops, vegetable plants, and non-bearing fruit and nut plants.

Use rates: 10-28 fl. oz./100 gal as a spray or drench on a 7- to 14-day interval. Treatment of most foliar diseases can be made on a 14-day interval.

Can be applied in:

- Greenhouses
- Nurseries, including field- and container-grown plants
- Conifer nurseries
- Residential and commercial landscapes



To perfect your program with Postiva, visit [GreenCastOnline.com/Postiva](https://www.GreenCastOnline.com/Postiva) or scan the QR code.

Follow Syngenta on YouTube @[SyngentaOrnamentals](https://www.youtube.com/SyngentaOrnamentals) for the latest product information.

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# Proper use NOT OVERUSE

Discover the importance of rotating modes of action to prevent fungicide resistance.

**U**nderstanding the technical benefits of the fungicides in your disease management program can make or break its efficacy. Here are three important areas to familiarize yourself with to build the most effective fungicide program.

**1 Understanding Fungicide Resistance Action Committee (FRAC) Groups** is crucial to properly rotating products and implementing a successful management program. When it comes to fungicides, different modes of action (MOAs) help ensure superior, long-lasting control of a broad spectrum of diseases.

“Pathogen resistance to fungicides is well known, and the performance of many fungicides has been affected to some degree by pathogens developing resistance,” says Fulya Baysal-Gurel, research associate professor at Tennessee State University. “So, developing a fungicide rotation program using different modes of action, as indicated by their respective FRAC Groups, is an important action in limiting the risk of fungicide resistance development.”

**2 Using novel chemistries** like succinate dehydrogenase inhibitor (SDHI) fungicides can give your program a boost. SDHIs have lower loads of active ingredients than other chemistries. They are more active on the binding site of the pathogen, so there are higher levels of activity with less active ingredient, which is a benefit environmentally and in terms of ultimate disease control because it takes less product to do more. The spectrum of disease that SDHI fungicides

control is narrow, so the advantage is there are lower use rates and more effective control for specific diseases.

**3 Taking preventive action**, rather than relying on curative treatments will provide the best results. Once a pathogen has invaded a crop, the quality is negatively impacted, which can affect sales. In the case of stem rots, once a stem is compromised it can no longer translocate water and nutrients up into the plant canopy, which ultimately results in crop loss.

“Trying to ‘cure’ or eliminate diseases like rusts, downy mildew and powdery mildew once they are established in the plant



Powdery mildew on dogwood

## Advantages of Mural

- Broad-spectrum activity – controls more than 50 foliar, stem and root diseases
- Versatile – can be applied as a spray or drench; labeled for use on ornamentals as well as certain vegetable plants grown for resale
- Particularly strong activity on rust diseases
- Effective at low-use rates
- As a drench, good *Pythium* protection and suppression of diseases such as rust and powdery mildew.
- Mural® fungicide gives you 1.2 ounces of *azoxystrobin* at a 2-ounce drench rate
- Longer residual activity over *azoxystrobin* alone



Powdery mildew on crape myrtle

## Treatment timing and strategies

- Focus on preventive applications, rather than curative treatments
- Begin making preventive fungicide applications when the weather or environmental conditions are conducive to disease development
- Vary products within a rotation
- By incorporating products that have both translaminar and systemic activity in fungicide rotation with other protectant fungicides, growers can likely extend their treatment interval while maintaining good protection

or crop often requires more applications on a shorter interval than if you are making applications to prevent it,” says Nancy Rechcigl, technical field manager for ornamentals at Syngenta. “This means more expense for the grower.”

### HONING IN ON PROPER MOA ROTATION

Using active ingredients with the same MOA repeatedly can result in reduced control and eventually lead to the elimination of certain active ingredients if resistance develops.

“The key to protecting or stewarding the fungicide tools we have available to us is proper use and not overuse,” says Steve Dorer, fungicide brand manager at Syngenta. “By that I mean rotating products to minimize potential resistance development from overuse of any one active ingredient. The key is to make sure that a single active ingredient or FRAC Group (MOA) is not applied to a single crop more than two times in a row without using a different MOA after that second application.”

By varying products within a rotation, growers can get better protection against tough diseases. A well-structured rotation program will consider how to use each products’ strengths and leverage different MOAs at times when they will provide the maximum benefit.

“For a robust rotation, it is important to select three products with different MOA classifications (FRAC Groups) that have proven activity on each disease problem that affects the crop,” says Rechcigl. “Position these



Downy mildew on rose



Downy mildew on snapdragon - Nancy Rechcigl, 2017, Illinois



products in the rotation based on their strengths and according to their label recommendations. Fungicide labels also include resistance management instructions for you to follow. This may include limiting the number of applications of a product before rotating to a fungicide from another FRAC Group or limiting the number applications per crop.”

Fungicides in FRAC Groups 7 + 11 are excellent choices for broad-spectrum disease control. This type of premix features an SDHI in group 7 and a strobilurin in group 11. SDHI active ingredients have a strong attraction to the binding site within a fungal cell’s mitochondria. When this site is blocked, processes within the mitochondria cease and the fungus is not able to survive, leading to extended protection and long-lasting disease control. A strobilurin fungicide, like *azoxystrobin*, offers excellent systemic activity and has been shown to move through more areas of the plant to protect existing and new growth.

“**Mural fungicide** is powered by two active ingredients, SOLATENOL® technology, an advanced generation SDHI and *azoxystrobin*, a systemic, broad-spectrum strobilurin fungicide,” says Rechcigl. “Mural penetrates and moves systemically throughout the plant tissue, protecting areas that may have been missed during the application. As a drench, Mural moves into the roots and into the stem and foliage, so all parts of the plant are protected. In addition, Mural has demonstrated plant-health benefits such as increased root density when used at low rates as a spray and as a drench.”

Although 7 + 11 premixes, like Mural, are strong choices for controlling a wide range of foliar and soilborne pathogens,

rotating with fungicides in other FRAC Groups can provide enhanced control of more difficult-to-control diseases.

“Combination fungicides in general broaden the spectrum of control and improve overall disease control,” says Dorer. “Both of those actives may control the same disease, but they’re doing it in two different ways. So, that provides an extra level of control.”

The latest innovation from Syngenta, **Postiva™ fungicide**, in FRAC Groups 3 + 7, is an excellent option to rotate with a 7 + 11 fungicide. Postiva fungicide is powered by ADEPIDYN® technology, the first member of a novel subclass of SDHIs, and *difenoconazole*, a DMI fungicide. With two modes of action, Postiva provides strong protection and reliable control of difficult diseases such as *Fusarium*, leaf spots, Botrytis, powdery mildew, as well as bacterial suppression.

“The product was designed to deliver both preventive and curative activity, with long residual performance,” says Rechcigl. “While many fungicides in FRAC Group 3 cause some plant growth regulation, this does not occur with Postiva. While Postiva is a fungicide, it also does an impressive job suppressing bacterial diseases as well, particularly those caused by *Pseudomonas* spp. and *Xanthomonas* spp.”

It is important that growers have as many products or “tools” in the toolbox as possible to control the problems they may encounter during production. Once resistance develops, fewer options are available for control, which puts additional strain on the remaining products.

“There is a finite number of pest control resources at their disposal,” says Dorer. “Many of them are grouped into modes of

actions. For instance, FRAC Group 7 fungicides are very important and effective, but the problem is if a disease becomes resistant to one of those SDHIs, it could be resistant to all of the SDHIs because the MOA is at the same site. Even though there may be a lot of fungicides on the market, there’s a limited number of modes of action, so if you’re not careful, you can eliminate an entire mode of action from your toolbox for controlling disease. That puts your business at risk because you’re not able to grow crops that are susceptible to the disease that has become resistant. It can also add to your expense because you’ll have to use more product to achieve the same level of disease control.”

### WHAT HAPPENS IF A DISEASE DEVELOPS RESISTANCE?

To maintain the full use of the pest control resources growers have access to, they must adopt best management practices to get the most out of them. If growers use them improperly, they could end up costing their business a lot more in the long term by reducing the kind of crops they can grow and requiring larger amounts of products to control pests.

“The biggest impact disease resistance can have on a grower’s operation is they’ll have to take extra steps to control that disease, including not growing the plant that is the host for that disease, and that will limit their revenue opportunity,” says Dorer. “They may have to also change their growing environment, which may cost extra money. Fungicide resistance does not happen overnight, but once it does it can make disease management more challenging. It truly is an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.”



Visit [GreenCastOnline.com/Ornamentals](https://www.GreenCastOnline.com/Ornamentals) or scan the QR code to discover the full fungicide portfolio from Syngenta.

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# New insects, NEW PROBLEMS

Novel thrips and mealybug species have ornamental growers searching for answers.

**C**rop-damaging insects are difficult enough to manage when growers have a full range of knowledge on how to combat them. Recently, researchers discovered a pair of new and uncommon pests that pose a range of threats to ornamental plants. Growers are now on the lookout for a new thrips species, *Thrips parvispinus*, as well as a rare mealybug variety, *Ferissia virgata*.

Thrips are tiny, elongated insects in the order *Thysanoptera* – adults have long, feathery wings while immature versions of the insect are wingless. Generally, thrips vary in length from 0.5mm-5mm, ranging in color from completely yellow to yellow with a dark abdomen. A few species are brightly colored – for example,

the distinctive reddish-orange larvae of the predatory *Franklinothrips orizabensis* and *E. vespiformis* thrips.

Thrips are mainly attracted to flowering plants. With their ability to move long distances in the wind or via infected plants, they are especially troublesome. These slender insects feed by scraping the outer layer of host tissue and sucking out sap and cellular contents. Results of this activity include stippling, silvering or discolored flecking of the leaf surface. Insect infestations are often accompanied by black varnish-like flakes of excrement, known more commonly as frass.

In 2020, a new thrips species was found in Florida on foliage plants. Identified as *T. parvispinus* (Karny), this was

the first report in the continental United States. A native to the Asian tropics, this species has been invading new regions over the past 20 years. Preferring to feed on foliage and tender buds, it has been found on various plant hosts including peppers, papaya, mandevilla/dipladenia, ixora, schefflera, gardenia and anthurium.

University of Florida entomology professor Lance Osborne is front-and-center researching the spread of *T. parvispinus*, first collected in a central Florida greenhouse by the state's Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services. The 2020 emergence of the insect was followed by its wider proliferation in 2022 on Palm Beach Island, where the pests decimated scores of residential gardenia hedges.



*Ferissia virgata* is a mealybug species that is showing up more often in greenhouses.  
Nancy Rechcigl - 2017



When scouting for mealybugs, check the base of the plant and the underside of leaves.

Photos courtesy of Lance Osborne, UF/IFLE

“Florida, first of all, is ground zero for these new and invasive species,” says Osborne. “The joke around here is about finding the bug of the week.”

A high reproduction rate, combined with a preference for hiding in protected areas of a plant, make thrips difficult to control. Studies are currently underway at the University of Florida research centers, although like any new pest, knowing what works best on *T. parvispinus* will take time. The industry doesn't yet know enough about their biology, host plant range or what chemicals will work best to control them, Osborne says. “So, we have to guess. When a new invasive species arrives, we can only perform tests on it at ground zero where it's been found. The greenhouse grower had to spray every few days and wasn't getting the level of control he wanted, so we don't know what's working.”

Biological control was another option explored for controlling this new species of thrips.

“The grower also tried lacewing larvae, one of the most effective predators of thrips, mealybugs, aphids, spider mites, leafhopper nymphs, scales and whiteflies. This method of biological control – using the lacewings as treatment – was too expensive,” Osborne says.

“Trials are currently underway screening insecticides for activity against this pest. During this ongoing learning period, growers must remain educated and stay patient,” says Osborne. “My advice is don't panic.”

## ANOTHER EMERGING PEST

Like thrips, mealybugs typically enter a greenhouse on infested plant materials, tending to hide along a plant's veins or in hard-to-detect crevices where branches connect to the main stem. Because of their small size, mealybugs are easily missed by growers until populations build to the point where control becomes more challenging.

The insects use their piercing-sucking mouthparts to draw sap and other fluids from leaf tissue, flower buds and shoot tips. White, waxy tufts on plants are telltale signs of a mealybug infestation, although mealybugs also excrete honeydew that turns into black sooty mold. The mold inhibits photosynthesis in plants, de-

# “When it comes to controlling thrips, the process can be a real challenge due to their small size and cryptic habits.”

tracting from their appearance and making them harder to sell. Additionally, feeding by adult and nymph mealybugs can cause stunting, leaf yellowing and distortion of plant parts.

Mealybugs are soft-bodied and segmented oval-shaped insects in the Pseudococcidae family. They are attracted to warm, moist environments, making a greenhouse operation a prime target for invasion. There are several species of mealybugs, with the most common being the citrus mealybug (*Planococcus citri*) and the long-tailed mealybug (*Pseudococcus longispinus*).

Another mealybug type has been making an appearance in ornamental crops over the last two years; it is known as the striped mealybug (*Ferrisia virgata*). While the occurrence of the striped mealybug is not new to the U.S., it is not as commonly seen in operations as the madeira mealybug, long-tail mealybug or citrus mealybug. This species has been found on poinsettia, hibiscus and some foliage crops.

Whether a new type of thrips or an uncommon mealybug, the discovery of a new pest is often bad news for growers, says Nancy Rechcigl, technical field manager for ornamentals at Syngenta. “Growers are faced with many challenges every day, but when a new pest comes on the scene, it can be very disruptive to operations,” says Rechcigl. “There are many questions that need to be addressed, such as ‘Can the pest be controlled with current insecticide products?’ ‘What is the life cycle of the pest?’ ‘What plants are susceptible?’ and ‘What is the best way to scout for this pest?’ Pests truly new to the U.S. often come under state regulations, and quar-

antine requirements may be put in place to help limit the spread to other areas. In these instances, shipping and transport of plant material can be sharply disrupted.”

## HOW TO GET STARTED

“Consulting a local extension agent can put a grower on the path to species identification,” notes Rechcigl. Agents can advise a grower on where to send insect samples, usually a state lab similar to the University of Florida facility where researchers are currently studying *T. parvispinus*.

Growers are understandably concerned about shutting down new thrips and mealybug populations before they build to damaging levels. Insecticides registered for the control of mealybugs must be applied early and often, as the white, waxy secretion that covers their bodies will likely necessitate multiple treatments.

“Sprays targeting the immature stage of mealybugs tend to be more successful, since they have less wax on their bodies and are mobile, which means they are exposed to more treated surfaces,” Rechcigl says.

“And when it comes to controlling thrips, the process can be a real challenge due to their small size and cryptic habits,” adds Rechcigl. “They prefer to feed on new, tender growth in terminal buds, flowers, and along the midribs and veins,” she says. “Getting sprays into these areas can be a challenge. Thrips also have a fast lifecycle under warm conditions, so populations can build quickly in a short period of time.”

**Mainspring® GNL** is a powerful insecticide when used in a proper rotation. Powered by the active ingredient,

*cyantraniliprole*, in IRAC Group 28, this systemic, neonicotinoid alternative shields crops from chewing and sucking insects such as thrips and mealybugs. Applied as a spray or drench, the insecticide works primarily through ingestion. Affected insects stop feeding within minutes, leading to mortality within a few days.

Mainspring GNL prevents pests from establishing and causing extensive crop damage. Drench applications deliver 10-plus weeks of control against established species like Western flower thrips (*Frankliniella occidentalis*).

“For foliar feeders like *T. parvispinus*, Mainspring GNL offers the potential for good control as shown in early trials,” says Rechcigl. “The key will be to get the drench on early, once the crop has fully rooted in,” Rechcigl says.



*Thrips parvispinus* is a new species of thrips that first appeared in Florida.

## Benefits

Mainspring GNL insecticide guards greenhouse and nursery crops against a wide range of chewing and sucking pests such as thrips, mealybugs, whiteflies and aphids. Features and benefits include:

- Control of multiple pests when applied as a spray or drench
- Extended protection through systemic and translaminar movement, which prevents insect populations from growing to damaging levels
- Resistance management that meets grower needs for effective alternative chemistries
- Broad-spectrum use that provides application flexibility with most biological control agents
- Saved time and labor on repeated applications while reducing plant damage caused by insect feeding



Visit [GreenCastOnline.com/MainspringGNL](https://www.GreenCastOnline.com/MainspringGNL) or scan the QR code to discover how to shield your crops from damaging pests.

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# A REMARKABLE CLASS OF LEADERS *in* HORTICULTURE

*“Leadership is not about a title or a designation. It’s about impact, influence and inspiration.”*

– Robin S. Sharma, author

Effective leaders embody many traits, including curiosity, innovation, resilience and adaptability.

They are courageous, genuine and self-aware.

In the following pages, some of these characteristics are used to describe the Horticultural Industries Leadership Awards Class of 2023. Now in its seventh year, please join Greenhouse Management, Nursery Management and Syngenta as we recognize six deserving honorees who continuously work toward the betterment of the green industry.



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## CLASS OF 2023



**Marcel Boonekamp**

Green Circle Growers  
Oberlin, Ohio  
**pg. 32**



**Mark Krautmann**

Heritage Seedlings & Liners  
Salem, Oregon  
**pg. 26**



**Jolly Krautmann**

Heritage Seedlings & Liners  
Salem, Oregon  
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**Shawn Cox**

Arizona Wholesale Growers  
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**Zachary Herrill**

United Plant Growers  
Long Beach, California  
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**Jennifer Moss**

Moss Greenhouses  
Jerome, Idaho  
**pg. 44**



**Ed Overdevest**

Overdevest Nurseries  
Bridgeton, New Jersey  
**pg. 14**

# Stride for **ST**

*Second generation leader Ed Overdevest is making a difference in the horticulture industry by viewing change as an opportunity and leading by example.*

BY KATIE MCDANIEL

PHOTOS BY  
ADDISON GEARY PHOTOGRAPHY

One day a young boy was walking alongside his father in a field. The boy was amazed by the length of his father's stride. He was trying to match him stride for stride, but he wasn't quite able to stretch his short legs to the same extent as his father's.

Just as the boy watched his father walk, he grew up watching him run a nursery business with the same purpose and determination. His father inspired him through his work ethic and drive. More than 60 years later the boy is now the second-generation leader of Overdevest Nurseries, and he often reflects on this significant memory of the way his father walked in the field and approached life.

Ed Overdevest is president of Overdevest Nurseries and co-owner alongside his wife, Gail. The nursery grows more than 2,000 varieties of trees, shrubs, vines, perennials and patio plants. They sell to independent garden centers (IGCs) and distributors within a 300+ mile radius of Bridgeton, New Jersey.

Ed's parents, John and Jean Overdevest, emigrated to the U.S. from The Netherlands in 1949, and John worked at several horticultural businesses before founding John Overdevest Nurseries in 1952. They produced field-grown plants and shipped them balled-and-burlapped (B&B). Ed was one of four children who grew up in the business and started working there when he was around 12 years old.

"At that point, I swore I would never do it because one of my first jobs was pulling weeds in a field nursery," Ed says. "There were so many weeds before the era of herbicides that on one hot, sunny day, I think I worked four hours and looked back to see I went all of three feet pulling weeds (laughs). So, I figured this wasn't the life for me, and that stuck in the back of my mind for quite a few years."



With more time spent working in the field, Ed eventually came to realize that he enjoyed it. He went to school to become an environmental engineer. After two years of studying and looking ahead, he realized that he would be working in an office most of the time, so he decided to switch schools, switch majors and take up horticulture. He graduated from Cornell University with a degree in horticulture and never looked back.

"I'm glad I made the switch and glad to be in this wonderful industry that we have," Ed says.

After Ed graduated from college in 1975, he joined the family business as an unofficial partner. In 1978, a purchase agreement was arranged so that over the course of 10 years, Ed was able to buy the nursery from his parents. This established a good financing plan for himself and a good retirement strategy for his parents.

"Both my parents were inspirations to me," Ed says. "They were hard working people and inspired me to live life with a purpose."

# ***RIDIE***



## ED OVERDEVEST



Before graduating with a horticulture degree from Cornell, Ed Overdevest didn't think he wouldn't pursue a career in horticulture.



Overdevest Nurseries grows more than 2,000 varieties of trees, shrubs, vines, perennials and patio plants.



“Ed has a lot of passion for doing what's right for our industry,” says Mark Sellev, president of Prides Corner Farms

A few years after coming back from college, Ed met Gail while playing ice hockey on a Saturday evening with some friends. Gail was a teacher for the first few years of their marriage, and she took a leave of absence when their first child was born.

During this time, she grew more involved with the nursery and later became a business partner.

“Ed would say I've never given up teaching because I'm always trying to teach the customers,” Gail says with a laugh.

She remains highly involved as co-owner and vice president through handling key accounts and other aspects of the business.

“In many ways my life partner is my business partner, and together we've been able to move this business forward from where we started to where it is today,” Ed says.

Together Ed and Gail enjoy traveling when they're not busy at the nursery. They love visiting different countries in Europe and exploring the geographical wonders of the United States. One of their most memorable experiences was rafting on the Colorado River.

“That was pretty challenging even though we had guides,” Gail says. “It was exhilarating, and we really had a good time on that.”

### View change as an opportunity

When Ed joined the nursery, they were growing a handful of items as specialty crops. As time went on, they started to expand the business and took on a variety of new items to grow.

“We really diversified the product line that we were growing in those early years,” Ed says. “We expanded our acreage substantially, and like many others, I was a part of a wave of the next generation of folks coming into the industry. ... We were all fortunate to live through an era, in the '80s and to a degree the '90s, that was the golden era of the nursery industry in the United States. Just like the *Field of Dreams*, if you grew it, people would buy it.”

The nursery grew in response to market demand and expanded its product line to include around 200 varieties of trees, shrubs, perennials and grasses. Along the way the nursery added production acreage, relocated their main facilities and continued to diversify heavily into new varieties, new product development and innovation.

“Ed has a lot of passion for doing what's right for our industry,” says Mark Sellev, president of Prides Corner Farms. “His standards



of quality are second to none. There's no one I know with a higher standard for growing high-quality plants."

Quality has been the nursery's cornerstone since day one, and the company is a participant in the Veriflora Sustainably Grown program.

Ed and Gail are able to share their standards of quality and other business acumen with their son, Ryan.

"We're thankful that despite the odds against it, we have a third generation who's working hand-in-hand with us and will keep it going beyond our days," Ed says. "It's tough to start a business, and we're thankful to my parents for doing that. It's tough to keep the business going, and we're thankful to our team for getting it done. It's tough to go beyond one and two generations to keep the business going, and we're thankful for the dedication and motivation of our son, Ryan."

After a six-year career in the world of finance, Ryan came back to the nursery bringing new talent, a new perspective and a renewed sense of energy for the business. Ryan has been with the business for almost eight years, and Ed and Gail are in the process of transitioning succession and ownership to him.

Overdevest Nurseries approaches change not only as a necessity, but as an opportunity. Ed explains that a lot of good comes with

change because it is an opportunity to do things better.

"There's a saying we use here, mainly regarding our drivers on the road," Ed says. "Reverse is the most dangerous gear in the transmission, and that's because you can't really see where you're going. Neutral, not quite as dangerous, but potentially as bad because a lot of people end up getting in the way and people pass you by. ... In a way, this is a metaphor for life as well because the last thing any of us want to do is go backwards, to constantly look in the mirror trying to figure out which way to go in life. The next thing we don't want to do is just sit there because we're going to be left behind and passed. The best way to move is forward and change is a part of that. At least, by going forward you're able to see the change, anticipate the change and adjust accordingly to get the journey done in the most effective way."

### Making a difference

Ed's mission in life and in business is to make a difference. He has been involved with the local economic development committee, the school board, and has spent more than 30 years on the local planning board. He currently serves on the AmericanHort board of directors.

"He's always had that mindset of just giving back, of being



"We respect our employees," Ed says. "We encourage them to respect each other and to work together because we accomplish more if we all do our part and work collectively towards a common goal to better not only the company, but to better ourselves individually."



Overdevest works with other growers that share similar philosophies to bring new varieties to market.



thankful for the opportunities that he's had, and now he has the opportunity to make a difference, whether it's guiding regulations or helping the community with different projects," Ryan says.

Ed explains that even though nature is typically one of the most challenging aspects of the business, often government regulations are just as challenging.

"The government makes it increasingly difficult for businesses to be successful," Ed says. "This is why associations and organizations are essential. We wouldn't have a chance if we didn't have representation to express our concerns, our point of view and to hold off or push back against regulations that just don't make sense."

Soon after joining the nursery business, Ed joined the state nursery association. That began a long period of time during which volunteered his way through a variety of different positions, eventually becoming president of the New Jersey Nursery and Landscape Association (NJNLA) in 1988.

Ed gets inspiration for and advice about running the business through being involved with horticulture organizations and associations. Each of those organizations and associations typically offer events, meetings, webinars and research that provide insight into the industry.

"There's a lot of good stuff they bring to the table in terms of business management, growing practices, financial planning and more," Ed says. "There's a world of knowledge that's out there available to all of us in the industry, and we're fortunate to have channels and publications that gather the information and make it available to us."

Ed has received numerous honors including Young Farmer of the Year, Young Farm Couple, Nurseryman of the Year,

Business of the Year, Grower of the Year and several marketing awards.

"He is a guy of very high integrity, incredibly thoughtful, meticulous and committed to the industry and to his own nursery at the highest level," says Sellev. "I feel very fortunate to call him a good friend. I respect him highly for his commitment to the industry and for doing the right thing every day. That's Ed Overdevest."

Ed is also a part of a collaboration with growers, new plant introducers and retailers that form a group called Syn-RG. This group includes five wholesale nurseries: Overdevest Nurseries, Prides Corner Farms, Willoway Nurseries, Saunders Brothers and Sheridan Nurseries.

These nurseries joined together because they share similar philosophies in how they run their business, the product line they each carry and dedication to IGCs.

"We're competitors, but at the same time we realize that there are opportunities out there," Ed says. "There are ways that we can better ourselves by collaborating with each other in terms of better growing practices, better marketing and better plant genetics."

"It's hard to do marketing and new plant introductions individually even for nurseries our sizes," says Tom Demaline, president of Willoway Nurseries. "Together we've got a lot more horsepower and it made sense for us to work together."

After consulting with collaborators, the group developed the "Handpicked for You" certification program to provide better choices to the consumer by filtering through the many new varieties that are coming into the industry every year and find those varieties that are truly good for consumers and allow them to be more successful with gardening.



Overdevest says a key part of his business is staying involved with industry organizations that, among other things, push back against unnecessary regulation.

## ED OVERDEVEST

respect each other and to work together because we accomplish more if we all do our part and work collectively towards a common goal to better not only the company, but to better ourselves individually.”

Since Ed’s parents emigrated from The Netherlands, he can relate to the workers who are a part of the H-2A program because they are also looking for an opportunity and a chance to better their lives and their communities. The nursery has participated in the H-2A program for over 20 years.

“They are family to us,” Ryan says. “We take a lot of pride and admiration to see them progress and be able to support their families back home.”

Ed believes we are all products of our experiences, and adversity makes up a large part of those. In life there are challenges. Being able to withstand those challenges, to live through them, to work through them and to overcome them is certainly character building and a major influence on enduring, overcoming and accomplishing things in life.

“When I was a kid, one of the drivers was delivering a load up in New York City, and I guess got spooked, got turned around and came back,” Ryan says. “That customer needed the product, so dad jumped in the truck and drove it there. ... He rolls up his sleeves and gets things done. In the nursery business, the weather is not always kind and there are always challenges. He leads with an even keeled demeanor. Even during the pandemic, it wasn’t crisis mode, it was ‘okay, let’s see what we can do to keep the business operating.’”

Ed’s favorite aspect of the horticulture industry is being in nature and working with the people who are a part of it. He grew up working outside and came to love the horticulture industry for the opportunity to experience each day as nature gives it to us.

“It’s certainly not just me,” Ed explains. “Whatever I might have accomplished in life, it’s part of a family collaboration, an employer and employee collaboration, a peer collaboration, being able to work together to do the best we can to get things done and make a difference.”

Under the leadership of Ed Overdevest, the nursery has overcome many challenges, grown substantially and continues to make a difference in the industry through environmentally conscious growing practices and helping consumers pick the best new plants.

“Ed, myself and Tom were in the EAGL program with Charlie Hall, and we got to know each other well,” says Sellew. “We liked each other. We had similar core values and felt we could do so much more together, share ideas and find new plants for the IGCs. We’ve been together for almost 10 years now.”

Overdevest Nurseries is making a difference for its customers, for its community and for its future. “We have our goals. We have our mission, but we try to go beyond just words,” Ed says. “We try to live what we believe and accomplish what we’re trying to accomplish.”

### Leading by example

From an early age, Ed was involved in the YMCA with a program called Operation Challenge, which combined adventure and a love of the wilderness. A former marine led Ed’s group during the summers of his 9th and 10th grade years.

“He was a very positive, encouraging and motivating individual,” Ed says. “He had the ability to lead and to inspire people to get things done. In many ways, he gave me a sense of what leadership was all about, of not only to being able to lead, but to lead by example and to encourage people.”

Ed believes in developing a vision and in getting people to share that vision. He allows people the opportunity to give input along the way. Through Ed’s leadership, he has applied this philosophy to the team’s approach to business.

At Overdevest Nurseries, the team embodies respect. Ed grew up working alongside people from all around the world with different nationalities and heritages. He was able to learn from them and respect them for what they were doing, the way they worked and their perspectives on life.

“We respect our employees,” Ed says. “We encourage them to

# *Building business and people* **WITH PASSION**

**United Plant Growers CEO Zach Herrill funnels energy and focus to elevate his company, his people and the industry.**

BY JOLENE HANSEN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROB ANDREW PHOTOGRAPHY

About a decade after Ken and Linda Herrill started United Plant Growers — UPG for short — a new face hit the scene. Early photos of the two-employee, one-truck California company show their son, Zach, overseeing plant deliveries from his car seat. Now UPG's CEO, Zach leads the company with ever-expanding passions for building business and empowering his teams.

What started as a 1980s backyard plant brokerage has segued into a far-reaching business that spans imports, growing operations and innovative live goods production, with a healthy emphasis on customized retail-ready potted tropicals. Big-box retailers account for 95% of company sales.

Still 100% privately owned and devoted to core principles of quality, value and customer service, UPG operates three distribution centers, four growing locations and 30 trucks. In the last decade, employees increased from 25 to 250, as an eight-fold revenue increase fueled growth. At its heart, Zach keeps listening, learning and inspiring as he leads UPG to new heights.

## **Early entrepreneurship and opportunity**

Young Zach inherited a strong business spirit from his parents, whom he describes as “hippie entrepreneurs” back then. His earliest memory of making money himself involved chickens he raised in a backyard coop. His teens brought a t-shirt printing business with a friend. Then he got involved in extreme sports, specifically freestyle motocross. He was good enough to consider going

pro — until a serious accident at 18 changed his path.

Zach's love for business then drew him to business school, but that wasn't destined to last. He was traveling in Asia and visited a business associate of his parents in Bangkok. Negotiating pottery prices in a jungle through a translator, Zach was stunned to realize the chasm between Thailand prices and what it could bring at retail. He dropped out of school and started an import business.

As his import company made money, his thoughts turned to UPG. “I saw a huge opportunity, not just with importing and going direct to the source in China or Thailand for pottery, but also for plants, for live goods,” he recalls. “At that time, there wasn't a lot of strong competition in California for houseplant suppliers. I just saw a big opportunity there, not only with the imports but also the finished side, supplying retailers. There seemed to be a gap of supply there.”

That was 2010, and Zach was 20 years old. He returned to the family business, still operating out of his parents' house. “For 13 years, I've really just been 100% focused on building the company,” he says. The official title of CEO came in 2019, followed by 33% ownership of the company in 2020. “I was really excited about having some ownership in it,” he remembers. “Then, of course, COVID happened.”

## **Building business through challenges**

When COVID hit, Zach had already overcome a major challenge to UPG's growth: His parents had built a



Zach Herrill, CEO of  
United Plant Growers

## ZACH HERRILL



solid multimillion-dollar company. Having a bigger business wasn't part of their dream. "They were very happy having 25 employees," Zach says.

The difference in perspective wasn't easily bridged. "I knew we needed to get bigger trucks. I knew we needed to shift to semis and larger trucks and a racking system. I knew we needed to use production lines and conveyor belts. All that takes a lot of investment," Zach says.

It took about eight years for his parents to embrace his vision and see results.

By 2020, UPG was better prepared than most. Zach had strengthened its supply chain and its business with Home Depot and IKEA, which both flourished during COVID. As other businesses struggled and closed, UPG was positioned to buy. Acquisitions expanded its customer base to include Trader Joe's, Costco and Sprouts. Business doubled in six months.

In his years at UPG — the last five on overdrive — Zach has restructured and redefined how it's run. The company operates three separate distribution centers: one for Home Depot, one for IKEA and a "grocery" distribution center servicing Costco, Trader Joe's and Sprouts. A full UPG merchandising team is on-site in Home Depot stores every single day. UPG's four growing locations combine for roughly 65 acres, with about a million square feet of controlled growing environment.

Zach's idea of Saturday fun is planning and drawing up new ideas. "I love building things, so we're constantly doing new conveyor lines, new production lines, new docks and greenhouses, making things more efficient," he says. "Having that concept and then seeing it come to fruition is always really fun."

He also likes to cook, works out multiple times a day — and takes ice baths, which he recommends wholeheartedly for focus.

### Listening, learning and leading

Several mentors played significant roles in Zach's journey, including Home Depot Senior Merchant Brian Parker. "People know him as the one of the toughest buyers in the industry," Zach shares. "He's taught me a ton about the retail side, and I've learned so much from him about consumers, what retailers are looking for and how to present to them. He's been instrumental in our growth."

Parker himself remembers starting in the horticulture business 40-plus years ago, watering plants in a Kmart garden center. Like those who took him under their wings, he felt moved to do the same for Zach. With so few young people following their parents into the horticulture industry, Parker was "thrilled" when Zach took over UPG — and he was confident in his success.

As a vendor and a leader, Parker says, listening differentiates Zach. “He got a very good education from his father on the business, but his number one priority was listening to his customer — which was me,” Parker says. As a result, Home Depot quadrupled its UPG business the last 10 years.

“More than anything else, Zach listens. He understands he has a lot to learn, but he does have a vision,” Parker says. “For the last four years, he was very strategic in how he grew that business. He knows that if you can't take care of the business, don't do it. That said, he's still willing to take risks. He's a risk taker, which is what's going to make him successful in the long run.”

Zach's readiness to listen extends to his teams. Wholesale sales manager Traci Kelemen joined UPG three years ago, after four decades in floral and potted plant sales and marketing. In her career, she's experienced leaders and companies where suggestions and questions are quickly shut down. But not here.

“Zach is always looking to improve. You bring something up and it's like ‘Let's explore that idea.’ It's a whole different attitude,” Kelemen says. “He's been in the industry most of his life, but still has that passion to make things different or innovative. It's easy to say, ‘Been there, done that.’ But he continues to try to find new ways of making it better.”

### Building people and teams

Zach's strategy for building people echoes his business strategy. “We just built a really good team behind me over the last 10 years. We've tried to find the right people, get the right people on the bus, and all go the same direction,” he says. Building top-functioning teams around revenue channels — a Home Depot team, an Ikea team, a grocery team — is key.

Parker suggests anyone can grow, broker and sell plants — the difference is service. “Zach leads a group of service associates that just are remarkable. They do such a great job for our stores, that's what separates UPG apart,” he says. “To be able to lead that group is pretty incredible. He's surrounded himself with the right people, which is a sign of a good leader.” He also credits Zach with being at the forefront of industry trends, like indoor tropicals.



Zach is always looking to improve. You bring something up and it's like ‘Let's explore that idea.’ It's a whole different attitude,” says UPG sales manager Traci Kelemen says.



Zach says he inherited his strong business spirit from his parents, whom he describes as “hippie entrepreneurs.”

Kelemen says Zach's “refreshing” leadership style creates an atmosphere where creativity and innovation thrive: “He's such a free spirit in a way. He's managing, but he's not pinning you down and directing you. He knows what needs to be done. He tells you what he needs from you to make that happen. And then he allows you to do it.”

An avid reading habit fuels many of Zach's ideas. He's a big believer in easily measurable metrics for building business and people — one reason for separate distribution centers with dedicated personnel. As he's assimilated knowledge from business leaders and mentors, he's designed a framework of performance indicators that allow people and creativity to grow and flow.

UPG is a 43-year-old business with a startup mentality.

## ZACH HERRILL



Herrill says he hopes to be seen and valued as a mentor in the same way he values his mentors.



“There’s so much opportunity out there,” Zach says, pointing to finished product and growing. “But there’s also a lot of opportunity to present a better product and a more unique product to the customer.”



UPG’s growth, Herrill says, has changed the way he views business and his sense of responsibility to his employees.

Most of Zach’s team is in their mid-thirties and shares his excitement for the company’s rocket ride. “We do things quickly, we start projects, we build software, build the programs, innovate wherever we can,” he says.

As an example, when UPG’s top-selling hydrangeas also saw the highest markdowns, they developed a new self-watering pot. And it’s not unusual to see this “hands-on, every single day” leader making the rounds, checking self-watering wicks or just helping clean soil off pots on the line.

### Looking forward

As Zach reflects on his mentors, he hopes he’s seen as a mentor, too. Growth changed his perspective. “All of a sudden, we have a fairly good-size business and all these people working for us and a lot of customers,” he says. “With separating all these divisions, I have a lot of younger people I’m [nurturing] to be the next executive member of the team.”

Zach takes real happiness in seeing employees grow. “You can see that they’re going to be something, then they flower into this amazing individual with so many

skills,” he says. Finding UPG’s next leaders is a priority for Zach and his three-member core executive team.

He says freedom to have a tangible impact on the business is essential in attracting young, creative, smart people. “Most people, at least strong leaders, don’t want to come in and have to work within a rigid framework all the time,” he says. “To me, that’s not exciting.”

Vertical integration is integral to Zach’s plans. “We’re on this path of vertical integration from the tissue culture all the way down to the finished product with a ceramic pot on it. We’re trying to control every part of the supply chain,” he says. “By doing that, we can offer a lot of value and give the customer the whole product at extremely competitive prices.” Goals include a UPG tissue culture lab and cutting farms at growing locations.

“There’s so much opportunity out there,” Zach says, pointing to finished product and growing. “But there’s also a lot of opportunity to present a better product and a more unique product to the customer.” That includes merchandizing and marketing opportunities that integrate internet and in-store customer experiences.

Parker expects Zach will always lead with distinction — backed by humility, honesty and lack of pretension. “Zach’s about as honest they come in the business,” he says. “... When you can deal with a handshake, and you know you’re dealing with somebody that’s honestly going to have your best interest and your customers best interests at heart, it’s an honor to do business with them.” ✨

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# The PERFECT PAIR

**The bond that drew Mark and Jolly Krautmann together proved the right combination for success, innovation and environmental stewardship for their nursery, Heritage Seedlings.**

BY MIKE ZAWACKI

PHOTOGRAPHY BY FLETCHER WOLD

Even though they grew up worlds apart, Mark and Jolly Krautmann's shared passion for the outdoors would draw them into a lifelong personal and professional partnership.

"We've made a great pair," says Mark, co-owner of Heritage Seedlings and Liners, a wholesale propagator of rare and unusual grafts, seedlings and cutting-grown woody plants based in Salem, Oregon. "Working together, Jolly and I were like Paul [McCartney] and John [Lennon], Butch and Sundance, Yin-and-Yang, to use an Asian analogy. We're just a really great complementary pair when it comes to our business skills and our personality types. And we're both workaholics to a fault."

Mark describes himself as a Midwestern farm boy growing up in Chillicothe, Missouri. His grandfather, Eugene Poirot, a South Missouri farmer and an agriculturist of note that was sensitive to land conservation issues, greatly influenced Mark's views on environmental stewardship.

"Rachel Carson and Silent Spring influenced his generation and the emphasis on stewardship and the early movement to preserve large tracts of land," Marks says of his grandfather. "He became quite a well-known conservationist and speaker in the Midwest. And he went to Washington, D.C. to testify on conservation measures like terracing steeply sloped fields, and a lot of stuff that became a part of modern agriculture." To date, the Krautmanns have restored more than 300 acres of

oak, prairie and wetland habitat on their farms.

Half a world away, Jolly's parents fled their home in China for Taiwan in 1949 following the Communist takeover of the mainland. She spent her youth enjoying the outdoors and developed a fascination with agriculture, which led her to study soil sciences at Texas A&M University in 1975. It was at the university where Mark and Jolly would meet.

"I met Mark in the first ten days at Texas A&M," Jolly says of the couple's whirlwind romance. "At the time, being in the U.S. and at the university was still so shocking for me and a little bit confusing. After I met Mark, though, everything just settled down. For me, it was really amazing to have a boyfriend and be studying in a foreign country."

Mark and Jolly married in 1976, graduated the following year and then moved to Oregon so Mark could pursue a job at a seed company in the Willamette Valley, the heart of the state's wine country. The Krautmanns fell in love with the picturesque region.

"I told Jolly, I don't care if I have to wash dishes. We're moving here, and that's that," he says.

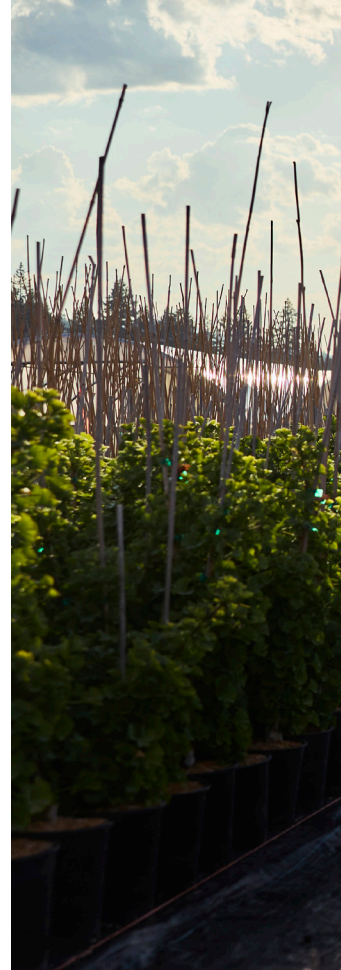
The seed company job lasted about a year until that company closed for financial reasons. Mark moved on to a job at a nursery in Portland, where he commuted for the next three and a half years. At the same time, Jolly had found a good job as a grower on a local mushroom farm.

After being released from his second job, Mark was confi-



## MARK AND JOLLY KRAUTMANN

According to the Krautmanns, a key to their success is consistently looking ahead and planning for the future.



dent he'd learned enough about the nursery business to strike out independently.

"I figured, if it fails, what's the worst that could happen? I'd be out of a job, which is where I started," he says of the fledgling Heritage Seedlings. "But the business took off like a rocket."

Meanwhile, Jolly quit her mushroom job when she became pregnant with the couple's first child, Jonathan. She used that time off to learn computer programming at the local community college.

"That was when micro-computing first got popular in the early 1980s," Mark says. "Jolly just rode the crest of that wave and became a very capable systems analyst."

At the time, Heritage Seedlings was growing quickly, and Mark says it became evident that he needed assistance managing the business's administrative side. So, Jolly decided to write a software program to manage many of these functions, allowing him to remain focused on the company's field operations, where he really wanted to immerse himself. Mark seemed to have a sixth sense regarding the field aspect and production side of Heritage Seedlings' operation.

"Unlike me, Jolly had the [administrative] vision when it came to the team," he says. "So, she wrote a whole software package for our nursery at a time when there wasn't anything but the most rudimentary software programs to help nurseries with payroll, inventory and such. We used that program for the next 20 years."

### The path less traveled

The Krautmanns were building something extraordinary with Heritage Seedlings. The company's business would double in size over and over during the ensuing years while maintaining the same strategy Mark and Jolly established at its start, anticipating customer trends and being solid predictors of what their clients would want to purchase years down the line.

"We've never grown the company on the strength of what people wanted today. We've always looked ahead and looked around the next curve and recognized what varieties people would want 10 years later," Mark says, citing their early offering of more native plants and rare deciduous landscape trees requiring less maintenance. "This has always been our key strength."

Despite what naysayers were saying, the Krautmanns jumped on the idea of growing unusual ornamental deciduous trees and shrubs for their clients. "People — my peers, at the time — said no one would ever buy this oddball stuff," Mark says. "So, we chose the path less traveled, as Robert Frost put it. And it made all the difference."

Today, Mark and Jolly continue to follow this same business philosophy and offer many of the same plants they introduced over 40 years ago, and they've added far more cultivated varieties. But while many could attribute nearly a half-century of success to the Krautmann's business savvy and dedication, Mark and Jolly are the first to recognize that Heritage Seedling's continued prosperity is firmly rooted in its employees and within the company's unique culture.

"I like to joke that over the years, I've propagated more people than I have plants," Mark says.

Fred Beshears has known the Krautmanns for nearly 30 years. And in addition to their commitment as environmental stewards and contributions to the nursery industry, Beshears, the owner of Simpson Nurseries in Monticello, Florida, marvels at the business they've grown and the loyalty and professionalism of its staff.

"They've brought a lot of unique plants to market, which has,



“Our employees own their successes and their failures,” Mark says. “We treat people with a level of respect that is a wide-open range to explore their talents and to discuss opportunities for improvement in complete transparency.”

without a doubt, been an asset to this industry on a national level,” Beshears says. “But the impact Mark and Jolly have on their employees amazes me the most. They teach their employees everything they know about this industry, and they really treat their people right. As a result, they always treat the customers right.

“Without a doubt, they’re subscribers to The Golden Rule – treat others as you’d want to be treated,” he adds. “And you see that [philosophy] in their team every time you deal with them.”

The core management philosophy at Heritage Seedlings is accountability, where everyone is responsible for their positive and negative actions.

“Our employees own their successes and their failures,” Mark says. “We treat people with a level of respect that is a wide-open range to explore their talents and to discuss opportunities for improvement in complete transparency. There’s no second-guessing or games being played here. When you see that, you must treat it like a sucker on a grafted plant — you chop it off. Otherwise, the longer you wait, the harder and harder it gets to remove.”

And like that initial plant offering that remains among their primary crops today, Heritage Seedlings’ culture has grown from a

strong tradition of mentoring.

“I have a favorite expression, and it’s ‘Help me understand . . .,’” he says. “And whether it’s something positive or something that’s bothering me, I ask the same question because the first word is ‘help.’ That immediately puts me in a position of need and places me on a lower level, in terms of hierarchy or authority, with the person I’m talking to.

“People get intimidated talking to an owner, which can be daunting for many people,” he adds. “Owners sometimes get more respect than they’ve earned. It’s always my goal to earn more respect than I was given differentially.”

So, it’s not unusual to find Mark in a greenhouse helping line workers pot plants or prune while casually striking up a conversation with his workers. “You place yourself in a vulnerable position, which dignifies their role in a way that words cannot,” he says.

Another cornerstone of Heritage Seedlings’ culture is personal achievement and success. New employees are placed in positions matching their talents and interests to ensure success. “To match people in positions they’re interested in and have the God-given talents for ensures their success with us,” Mark says. “And it in-

## MARK AND JOLLY KRAUTMANN

volves a lot less babysitting and scrutiny.”

And the Krautmans foster a working environment built on open communication and transparency. “We have ‘extreme’ open communication, and I use the word ‘extreme’ very carefully,” Mark says.

“We take [communication] to the extreme because we tell people just to blurt out what they’re thinking. You’d be surprised how many people find that really uncomfortable because they’re not accustomed to that [level of openness in the workplace].” However, it’s a trait that not only alleviates layers of bureaucracy and breaks down barriers within the workplace, but these newfound skills transfer from their professional lives to strengthen their personal relationships, as well.”

Finally, Heritage Seedlings subscribes to a no-nicknames policy.

“We never compromise on the issue of mutual respect,” Mark says. “We tell people that we call each other by the names that their mommas gave them. Nicknames invariably devolve into something that someone may begin to feel some resentment about. And when you’re dealing with different [ethnic] cultures, there may be sensitivity to the little nuances in [a nickname’s] meaning.”

### Leadership

Regarding their leadership styles, Mark and Jolly look no further than their respective families for their inspiration.

For Mark, his family was sensitive to the human condition. For example, his father, Edmund, a veterinarian in rural Missouri, catered to impoverished farmers who were desperately struggling to survive. “I have clear memories of my father getting calls in the middle of the night to go out to some sump holler, knowing that poor farmer had no way of paying him,” he recalls. “The farmer would say, ‘I wish I could pay ... it’s going to be a spell ... maybe even a few years.’ My father would just say, ‘Oh, George, let’s not worry about this.’ And then the wife would come out with a gooseberry pie [for my dad].”

His mother, Joan, a botanist and a “complete plant maniac,” volunteered with the local arts council and successfully petitioned the governor’s office for funds to bring in world-class musicians from New York, Philadelphia and Chicago to perform locally and expand residents’ exposure to culture and the arts.

Half a world away, Jolly was similarly influenced by her parents. Her father was an Army colonel who routinely took care of the needs of hundreds of people under his command, and her mother was a school teacher for 30 years, responsible for guiding and developing impressionable minds.

“They both had a really big influence on me,” she says. “I remember they provided me with everything I ever needed for [my education] and indulged me in all of the things I was fascinated about. And out of all of the things they gave me, I’d say their wisdom most influenced me.”

Together, Mark and Jolly have focused their passions on a long history of industry and community service. The pair have been



“People — my peers, at the time — said no one would ever buy this oddball stuff,” Mark says. “So, we chose the path less traveled, as Robert Frost put it. And it made all the difference.”

heavily involved in the Oregon Association of Nurseries (OAN), representing over 600 individual nursery stock producers, retailers, landscapers and related companies serving the nursery and greenhouse industry. Mark served as the trade organization’s president in 2003 and 2004.

The Krautmans have been very active in a variety of plant and conservation societies, in particular the International Oak Society, where they are generous financial backers in its efforts to preserve endangered and threatened oaks.

Their involvement extends to local charities, as well. The Krautmans were active with the local parochial schools and school boards when their children — Jonathan and Joan Claire — were growing up. In addition, Mark and Jolly have been very active in their support of children’s advocacy groups.

“This industry, this Earth, has helped us make a good living, and we just want to give back and spread that success around,” Mark says of the pair’s industry and community work.

While they remain involved with Heritage Seedlings, Mark and Jolly have stepped back a bit from the day-to-day operations to enjoy their lives together. When they’re not traveling, visiting their children in Arizona and Puerto Rico, or hiking throughout the nearby scenic Columbia River Gorge, they can be found relaxing at home, barbecuing in the backyard, and listening to classic rock and the blues.

But the business and their love for plants and the outdoors are never too far out of reach for this dynamic duo.

“We just visited Japan and Korea last December,” Mark adds. “We were there to sightsee — they’re just beautiful countries to take in — but also to check out some new crops, too. And to visit friends we’ve made there over the last 20 years, which is amazing when you think about it.

“Jolly and I have been so blessed with our careers and our lives together,” he says. “I can’t imagine [taking this journey] with anyone else.” ✨

*Mike Zawacki is a Cleveland-based writer who has written about various aspects of the green industry for nearly two decades.*

MARCEL BOONEKAMP

At Green Circle Growers, Marcel Boonekamp oversees acres of orchid production — and the growers who make them bloom.

*Developing*  
**green thumbs**

BY CHRIS MANNING  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY TIANA KROPKO

**M**arcel Boonekamp grew up in a small village in The Netherlands near Rotterdam, where his parents ran a greenhouse operation growing tomatoes.

"That's how I grew up," he says.

As he got older, Boonekamp continued his education, studying abroad in New Zealand and Canada in addition to earning a degree. In his 20s, as he was earning his Bachelor's degree in Horticulture, that's when he decided to fully pursue his family's career as his own.

"Aside from growing plants. The thing I like is that this industry is willing to share," he says. "We're visiting each other, sharing growing tips. My dad had groups of five or six growers that prepared their crops by walking every week in each company's facilities and sharing costs. They compared data, financial info, labor concerns, energy costs and I was impressed by that. And it's also not something you can just copy. It's still something you have to do."

"I'm convinced," he adds, "that sharing and doing that is how we all get better."

Today, Marcel is the director of growing at Green Circle Growers in Oberlin, Ohio — one of the largest greenhouses in the United States. There, at a 150-acre-plus facility, he oversees the largest orchid production facility in the United States. His job involves technical growing aspects, but also picking out the right varieties, using state-of-the-art technology to optimize growing conditions and planning out the growing space for maximizing efficiency. Green Circle regularly expands, so part of Marcel's job is "always being ready for the next thing."

"He's about building people up and giving people their opportunities," says his wife Jacqueline. "He's not one to yell and say, 'This is how it has to be done.' He will say, 'If you have a better idea, tell me.' If you have the right mentality, he's the best boss you could have."

"We are on 150 acres. We are not a small place," says Corwin Graves, Green Circle's VP of growing who has worked with Marcel for six years overall and more closely in the last three years. "For me to just be able to meet with him weekly, and just support him with the resources he needs and not have to look over every little thing, it's huge. I do not go in that greenhouse and walk the

rows and track the details because I know he's doing that and I know his team is doing that. There isn't that need to babysit or micromanage."

### Starting out

When he graduated, Marcel took on co-ownership of his family business. A year later, his older brother joined the family business, too. They then transitioned the business over to cut rose production, forming Boonekamp Roses in 2002.

"It was a tough one — it's a lot of work to build the brand up," he says. "But that was one of the reasons why I did it. [In The Netherlands], it's hard to build a brand in tomatoes."

The transition was initially successful. They built a second high-tech facility a year later, seeing a booming future for the company.

"The headwinds were strong," Marcel says.

But when the world economy started to shift around 2008, the business did, too. Energy prices rose, making the cost of business higher and higher every year. Boonekamp Roses shut down in 2013.

This, however, opened up new paths for him. The end of one chapter meant something new — and a new country.

"This was the first time where I really looked at what I wanted to do," he says. "I didn't want to leave the industry — it's a great industry, it's an open industry where we share a lot. And working with plants and people is great. It's still the one industry I want to be active in."

### Coming to green circle

After he shut down his own business, Marcel says it wasn't his plan or dream to move to the United States. Or anywhere abroad for that matter. He and Jacqueline were most worried about their young family. They have three children — Jessie, Milou and Leon — who they wanted to make sure would grow up in the best environment for them.

"Horticulture, at that time, was becoming more and more international," he says. "The Netherlands led with techniques and equipment. So I knew there was demand abroad. But [going abroad] wasn't my first choice."

But, as it happened, a recruiter connected Marcel to Green Circle Growers. He and Jacqueline went on a visit to Green



Green Circle Growers is the largest orchid production facility in the U.S.



## MARCEL BOONEKAMP



Marcel Boonekamp has adopted some Dutch production methods at the Ohio-based greenhouse.

Circle. During the tour, he was impressed with the facility and what the work offered him. The Oberlin area also felt like a good place for the Boonekamp family to establish new roots.

He started at Green Circle in 2015 as a grower manager and is now the director of growing overseeing the orchid facility. He and his family started out by living in a house on the farm's property.

"It wasn't the United States that sold us per se," he says. "I think Green Circle, and what they were doing, I really liked their orchid program and that's where I spend most of my time now. Ownership, the company itself — they offered op-

portunities to grow and get better. And I could see how I would value the company and the people."

"We came here with five pieces of luggage and 20 boxes," Jacqueline says. "The van Wingerden family [was] awesome, helping with babysitting and just being great people on top of being a great employer."

Marcel says the emigration process was a challenge for this family.

"At the time, the kids were about 8, 6 and 4," he says. "They picked up English [easily], at least compared to the adults. But it was an adjustment for them, to make friends, learn the language. It wasn't

easy but they pulled it off. And I'm really thankful for my wife — she did the most work on that part."

"At work," he adds, "you're stepping in, observing a lot, talking a lot with people to see how things work and find out the culture, both American culture and company culture. Before you really start to implement things or start to understand things, you have to do that. It wouldn't work if I walked in and said, 'We're going to do it the Dutch way' or 'I think I know it all'. It's already a successful running company. It's finding out how you think you can make things better."

### Pieces of home

Marcel has kept up with two hobbies from back home: indoor soccer and windsurfing. He plays in an indoor soccer league near Oberlin. And while he can't watch every game, he is a fan of Ajax, one of the best teams in the Netherlands and in Europe, as well as the Dutch national team.

Windsurfing, he says, was popular in the 1980s when he was growing up. His dad got him and his brothers into it, but then work and family cut into time for hobbies. But he brought his old windsurfing equipment in the move and now windsurfs up on Lake Erie.



Marcel has built confidence in his production team. And peers say he's not afraid to help with any task at the greenhouse.





Peers appreciate Marcel's ability to manage the production side and the people side of the business.



"It's a great feeling being on the water," he says. "It's one of the best sports for me."

Making time for hobbies, he says, is another way his father influenced him.

"Growing up, my dad didn't play a lot of sports," he says. "But in his 20s, he

started to road bike, speed ice skate, stuff like that. So he was always working, but I also saw him finding time for sports. He told me that [sports] are a different energy you use and I really found later on that he's right. It clears up your mind and it helps you stay fit and that's important."

Green Circle.

"I do those trips to see new things, to see new people, to talk to people, to stay in touch with exactly what I started with growing up," he says. "That makes you better, makes you sharper."

When he goes on trips, Marcel often brings other Green Circle employees with him so they can learn along with him.

"[New production information] can be hard to explain sometimes," he says. "I've seen that bringing people along and then coming back from the trip they'll be like 'ah, now I know why we are looking at that.' It's all about letting people see why I'm looking at something a certain way or want to change something. Otherwise, people only see Green Circle, right? We are diverse, but they have to see something else to be open minded and get the broader picture."

"He loves innovation," says Aaron Porter, Green Circle's grower manager. "If there's anything that can make our jobs easier or more efficient, he's all for it."

Aaron traveled with Marcel on a trip to the Netherlands last November.

"That's him in his element," Aaron says.



### Blending two worlds

Part of Marcel's job is blending his Dutch background with North American style greenhouse growing. It can be challenging to mesh, he says, because the markets are so different. But a program like Green Circle's orchid program is somewhat fashioned after the Dutch model of dialing in one specific crop. They also use a Dutch greenhouse manufacturer, various Dutch suppliers and Dutch breeders.

"We want to be on the forefront of new technology — if it makes sense, if it's manageable."

Part of keeping up to date on technology are multiple trips a year to the Netherlands to visit growers and attend trade shows. There, Marcel does his version of what he saw his father do while he was growing up: network, learn from others in the field and take lessons back to

## MARCEL BOONEKAMP



Marcel helps Green Circle Growers take stock of where the company is within the global market and helps them identify opportunities.

“He helps us take stock of where we are within the global industry and what the opportunities are,” Corwin says. “Being a native Dutch speaker, having those connections, it opens up doors for us.”

Corwin adds that the way Marcel runs his team provides a good model for other managers. The Green Circle orchid program, he says, helped them sell other crops (namely foliage) because the orchid quality was so high.

“We are looking to implement what he does into other areas,” Corwin says. “He’s brought a level of professionalism that I’d like to see brought into the other greenhouse areas.”

### Overseeing orchids and growers

According to Corwin, what makes Marcel “rare” is his ability to excel at both the growing parts of his job and the leadership parts. Some people, he says, are more suited for one or the other. Or, if they’ve been promoted, leave some of the growing responsibilities behind.

That’s just not how Marcel is wired.

“He’s so strong on details,” Corwin said. “He’s one of the rare people who has the ability to grow and has a good feeling for what it takes to grow plants. But he also understands people and people respond to him really well. He really excels at being a cheerleader for the staff in terms of rallying them and keeping employees engaged and building the team up.”

“He will help you up the ladder if that’s your ambition,” Jacqueline says. “You have to be showing your worth. If you’re trying to cut corners everywhere, then you might not mesh. He wants to help you develop your green thumb, but if you’re not putting your best effort in, it’s not going to be a green thumb.”

For Marcel, the key is communication. Clear expectations are set for employee behavior, as well as what the orchids require. From there, it’s about open dialogue. He meets with team members one-on-one weekly to talk about how everything is going, what concerns they have and what they need from him. It’s something Marcel took the initiative to do because he felt it would make the team stronger.

“If you don’t speak up,” Marcel says, “issues or frustrations linger.”

Aaron says Marcel also chips in however he needs to.

“He’s not afraid to roll up his sleeves or get dirty if we need to move tables or anything that’s not glamorous,” he says. “He’s hands-on with leadership. ... He never expects anyone to do anything he won’t do.”

That includes upgrades at Green Circle. Andrew vGeest, a productivity specialist at Adept Ag that works on irrigation with Green Circle, says Boonekamp works hand-in-hand with him during upgrades and always is dialed into exactly what the facility needs. Since they’ve been working

together, they’ve completed three irrigation projects.

“He is always cognizant of what he’s asking for,” Andrew says. “And it makes the growers under him better. It makes the company better.”

Orchids are Marcel’s focus, his domain at Green Circle. According to Corwin, orchids fit what makes Marcel a standout grower and leader.

“It’s a mono crop, so you are allowed to be detailed with settings and parameters and what you’re tracking,” Corwin says. “His personality is really suited to that in terms of just being on top of details and small tweaks and just getting every last inkling of performance out of the crops. He has the personality for it and we have the facilities for it, so it’s a nice match.”

Green Circle has grown in the last several years. As part of whatever comes next, part of Marcel’s job will be helping Green Circle balance what it grows vs. what the market is demanding. They also want to continue expanding their national footprint while also expanding their internal sustainable practices.

“It sounds really big,” he says. “But we are getting close to that.”

As that happens, Marcel will be there, overseeing everything working to grow plants — and the people growing them.

“In a healthy way, it’s pushing people to accomplish more,” he says.



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## SHAWN COX

Shawn Cox, general manager of Arizona Wholesale Growers (AWG), has spent some time in the shoes of everyone in the company.

“My parents were very big on ‘you will never manage a nursery — at least not their nursery — unless you’ve done every job,’” he says.

Now when he meets with employees about what they’re doing, he has a deep appreciation for it. Because he’s been there.

“We’re constantly pushing for innovation here, and I can remember back in the day when we were on the canning pile and we did everything with shovels,” Shawn says. “We’ve had potting machines for at least 15 years, but I can remember what it was like to be a kid in the summer filling buckets with a shovel.”

AWG was founded by Shawn’s parents, Bill and Cindy Cox, in 1982. They started on 2.5 acres leased from their grandparents. It started as a bait and tackle business, a worm farm. One of their customers was a local nurseryman, and he suggested that they take some of the extra land they had and grow oleanders.

After a few years running the bait and tackle business and the nursery, Bill and Cindy decided they needed to pick one business and stick with it. Today, Arizona Wholesale Growers produces about 550 different species of plants. Early on it was mostly shrubs, then trees, then in the early ‘90s, the nursery began growing agaves, cactus and other drought-tolerant material. Over time, that has become a much larger portion of the business.

Now, 40 years after Shawn’s parents started the business, Arizona Wholesale Growers is growing on 160 acres. In 2022, the company purchased another 245 acres in the greater Phoenix area. They’re breaking ground this summer, putting in the well and the pond, and Shawn says within five years he hopes the nursery will have 400 acres in the valley.

In addition to the new acreage, under Shawn’s leadership, AWG has doubled its sales every five years, developed and built a tissue culture lab and created an online retail division, Happy Valley Plants.

“Shawn Cox is not only a great leader,

he is also a great innovator, mentor, motivator, teacher and friend to everyone he meets,” says John Kime, AWG’s sales manager.

### Problems into opportunities

Being in the middle of the Southwest has its perks. AWG reaches the big markets of California and Texas. It also serves Nevada and New Mexico. And its plant material is well-acclimated to the sun and heat of those climates.

Before the wet winter of 2022, California was looking to reduce its water use, so the state was offering incentives for people to tear out their lawns and replace them with drought-tolerant material. These regulations helped AWG, which grows plenty of material adapted for the driest conditions.

“There’s a lot of people clamoring for this drought-tolerant material, and you know if it was grown in Phoenix that it’s going to be OK,” Shawn says.

In 1995, AWG expanded by purchasing land in Camp Verde, about 100 miles north of Phoenix. The Cox family added cooler-weather crops there, including stone fruit, cold-hardy cactus and agaves, as well as deciduous trees. At the end of the summer, when material in Phoenix starts to look stressed, they can bring material south from Camp Verde to the Phoenix market.

AWG’s customers are a fairly even split between landscape contractors, wholesale and retail garden centers. In-state, the nursery does a ton of business with local landscapers. Its biggest out-of-state customers are wholesale nurseries, rewholesale nurseries and retail garden centers.

During the early part of the COVID pandemic, supply chain issues increased business costs in areas like fertilizer and container prices, but especially for trucking.

“Leadership is problem solving and there is no problem that can’t be solved,” John Kime says. “Problems are not problems for Shawn. Problems are opportunities to make work and lives better.”

The trucking problem turned into an opportunity to expand AWG’s reach.

“California historically has always been cheaper to buy plants out of than Arizona, and we got to this place during COVID where it started becoming as cheap or

cheaper to pull material out of Arizona,” Shawn says.

This was the chance AWG needed to become priced competitively with California nurseries. AWG picked up a lot of business, especially from Texas.

“Honestly, what it allowed us to do was get a little bit of a foothold into other businesses to the east, allowed people to try our products and our customer service to see how they like us,” Shawn says. “We’ve maintained a lot of customers that we picked up a couple of years ago. It’s been a huge growth opportunity for us, and I find every year we’re shipping more and more east of Arizona, which is very exciting.”

### Control your supply

One important lesson Bill and Cindy taught Shawn that they learned with the bait and tackle business was the importance of managing your supply.

“Back in the day it was worms and waterdogs,” Shawn says. “They went all the way up to Nebraska harvesting waterdogs. In the nursery, we’ve taken that lesson as well. If you want to maintain a large plant palette, you really have to do a lot of your own propagation and seed sourcing.”

During the COVID pandemic, when the supply chain issues began, Arizona Wholesale Growers was still impacted with items like stakes, pots and fertilizer. However, Shawn says the nursery dodged the worst of the crisis because his crew propagates so much of its material in-house.

“We started our cloning lab about three years ago, and we’re finally at a point now where we have a little bit of extra availability,” Shawn says. “Bit by bit, we’re getting to a point where we’re able to offer some of those clone specialty agaves and aloes that people are looking for right now. We ship those not only around the country, but around the world.”

In 2018, Shawn and his wife Lauren, with the help of a friend, built the first cloning lab in their garage at home. It started as a fun side project, but it went well enough that Shawn decided to make it a legitimate part of the business.

“We had a couple of unique agaves we put up on Instagram and they really got traction,” he says. “We had a lot of people

SHAWN COX

Shawn Cox has led Arizona Wholesale Growers through innovative approaches and problem solving.

# *An inquisitive mind*

BY MATT MCCLELLAN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY  
MICHAEL JENNINGS

## SHAWN COX



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asking for them. I thought back to my folks and their way of building a culture of finding a way to take control of your supply to keep business steady. It got to a point where if we really wanted to make a go of this business, then we need these agaves. And the only way to get those agaves reliably is to make them ourselves.”

He came up with the brand Happy Valley Plants and built it into an online retailer, international wholesaler and plant liner company. Shawn took the lab out of his garage and built a full cloning lab with hospital-standard sterility and a team of six botanical experts, along with ongoing Arizona State University internships.

Soon after creating the brand, Shawn was contacted by customers in Europe and Asia. He’s found that European customers mainly want the well-known agaves and cactus. In Asia, customers are looking for collector’s items. After sending two shipping containers of drought-tolerant material to Japan, Shawn spent 10 days visiting existing customers and meeting some new ones. He even gave a talk to members of the Japanese Succulent Institute. After the talk, Shawn had a translator help him

do a Q&A with attendees. Many of the participants brought their own agaves from home to show and tell him about how they were doing.

“It’s just so cool to talk with people who care so much about their hobby,” Shawn says. “You’d be blown away at how far they’ve taken it all. They’re showing me pictures of these incredible growing environments they’ve set up because it’s difficult to replicate the native environment in a place that can get so much rain and be so humid.”

The AWG lab produces more than 75,000 liners per year and has more than 25 different species currently in propagation. The work keeps ramping up, with a 200% increase in output every quarter.

Shawn graduated from Arizona State University with a degree in plant biochemistry and molecular biology. He did some cloning work in college. Since he worked with plants at a cellular level back then, he wasn’t worried that he wouldn’t be able to handle it.

“Luckily, I finally got the opportunity to specifically use my college degree in a bigger way than how I’d been using it before,”

Shawn says.

He enjoys the challenge of working with plants at a genetic level. With the lab, he and his team have been creating new hybrids. He says he’s always looking for interesting cultivars that pop up in the nursery, but most of the effort has gone into cross-breeding agaves for specific characteristics. In the aftermath of the February 2021 Texas freeze, he noticed an increased demand for cold-tolerant agaves.

“They prefer big agaves, being from Texas,” Shawn says. “[Agave] *ovatifolias*, *americanas*, *truncatas* — but they also want cold-hardy.”

His group has been cross-breeding *A. parryi truncata*, *A. utahensis* and others with the goal of introducing a new look but keeping the cold tolerance.

### Finding a dream team

One of the toughest parts of nursery production is determining what to grow. This is doubly true when it comes to new varieties. Nurseries have a limited amount of land to grow on and you need to decide what to grow in your space.

“It’s hard to pick a winner,” Shawn says.



“The market decides what plant is going to trend, what plant is really going to catch fire and take hold in the industry. And it's difficult in our industry because wholesale nurseries are essentially manufacturers, putting these products together. But it's a very long-term process. You've got these pillars in our industry: the landscape designers or the architects dreaming these projects up, the contractors or landscapers making it happen, doing the work on the ground. Then you've got the wholesale nurseries that are growing the plants for these jobs. There's a little bit of discord there, where we're not all communicating on the same page.”

One of Shawn's ideas to alleviate this problem was the creation of a horticulture design advisory board. He reached out to landscape architects from Arizona, California and Texas, a professor of environmental horticulture at ASU and landscapers who specifically work in procurement for large contractors in Arizona and California. He affectionately calls it the innovation “dream team.”

They get together twice a year and talk about plant breeding for challenging

landscaping conditions, water conservation efforts and what can be done as an industry to try to steer people in a responsible direction. But the biggest advantage to meeting with this group is it allows the chance to potentially smooth out bumps in procurement.

AWG tries to draw attention to local native species and make the case as to where it fits inside the landscape industry. After making the pitch and asking for feedback, he'll ask if the design board would want to give any of these plants a shot on one of their projects.

“Then, we'll show them species that we're breeding together, and we'll explain our thought process on why we're breeding particular plants together,” Shawn says. “We'll show those cultivars off to them and ask if they think we should go down this road.”

The first meeting was in 2022. AWG showed off some of its new agave hybrids, like a variegated *A. parryi truncata*, a variegated agave blue glow and a few others. The innovation team provided feedback and direction on what they liked, how they'd use it in jobs and how often they'd spec it. That

feedback allows AWG to decide whether to ramp up production on those varieties in the lab, and in 2-3 years a decent quantity of 5-gallon containers will be available. Then the innovation team's designers and architects start penciling them in for projects that will mature in 2-3 years.

“It's allowed us to dovetail production from the lab with production and sales,” Shawn says. “I think that's good for the industry to be able to see trends coming, at least for the manufacturing side of it, and to support the architects and landscapers by having the things they're looking for when they actually need them.”

### Learning on the job

When Shawn was young, his parents pushed him to work in the restaurant industry.

“They were 100% on board with the idea that if you really want to learn how to work well with customers and how to provide good service, you should go wait tables,” Shawn says.

For five years from high school through college, that's exactly what he did.

“My father has been my mentor, in



## SHAWN COX



regard to the work I do here with my hands,” Shawn says. “He’s the one who taught me how to glue pipe correctly. He’s the one who taught me how to diagnose water issues, how to check error codes on the VFDs and what to look for if there’s a problem with a plant.”

However, Shawn says his mother was his mentor for how to work with people in the company. She taught him how to communicate well with people and ask the right questions about what’s going on in their job, and what they’re dealing with in their day.

A third mentor came later. His name, ironically, was David Plant, an Australian who became well known in Arizona.

“He was constantly going around the valley and helping people with their fertigation systems and plant health diagnosis,” Shawn says. “He loved efficiency, so he was always trying to help people implement new technologies in the industry.”

For a brief time after college, Shawn spent a month touring Israel with David and a group of Arizona nurserymen. They toured a FIDO Tech facility and the company’s plant monitoring technology impressed AWG enough to buy it and implement it in Arizona. After adopting the system at AWG, Shawn would call Dave and ask him to help translate what the plant was telling them through the system. AWG made some huge changes

to its irrigation system based on what they learned from that monitoring system, and it wouldn’t have happened without David’s mentorship and insistence on paying attention to the plant.

Though Shawn worked in the family business, he got the itch to do something new. For seven years, he worked as a math and science tutor. He especially enjoyed working with kids. However, after getting married, Shawn and his wife wanted to have kids of their own. The tutoring business is mostly evenings and weekends, and he wanted to be home with his family.

So he talked to his parents about returning to the family business. That was 12 years ago.



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out — as much as I like numbers.”

### Empowering employees

Like many in the industry, AWG has struggled to find new hires. To combat the difficulties of bringing new people in, Shawn focuses on promoting from within. He likes to sit down, face-to-face, with the people on his team and show them what they do and why they do it that way. He explains the reasoning behind it and adds context of how the company might have done it in the past. The goal is to give them a sense of ownership in what they’re doing on a day-to-day basis.

“I want to inspire the people on the team to know that they can come to work every day and make a difference,” he says. “I want someone who works with me to come in and evaluate why we’re doing what we’re doing and to think about the end user of our product. It’s mainly going to end up in someone’s home and it’s going to make a difference in their life every day. Or it’s going to end up at the park they take their kids to, or the commercial shopping center they go to. As managers, something we try to instill in people is if you can see down the road and envision the steps it takes to get there, you are invested in each of the steps to get that plant to its mature possibility.”

Shawn believes in giving people the ability to make choices on their own and then talking to them about the results of their choices. This is his way of empowering his staff to love their work.

### Back to nature

When Shawn started organizing donations for the Arizona Nursery Association, he started convincing the association members that donations should be more plant-related. He got involved with the U.S. Forest Service, and specifically a local charity called Natural Restorations. He started by providing native plant material that didn’t meet quality standards for a residential installation to help reforest burn areas affected by wildfires. Then he started convincing other wholesale nurseries to get involved, too.

Well before working at the nursery, the outdoors was an important part of Shawn’s life. As a kid, he went camping a lot. It was a cheap vacation, he says, and with his parents running a bait and tackle shop, you can bet there was fishing involved. Whether hunting mule deer in the desert or elk in the woods, or fishing in small lakes in the mountains, he enjoyed the outdoors.

Shawn and Lauren have three sons, and he can’t wait to go hiking and backpacking with them when they’ve grown a bit (they’re currently 9, 6 and 2 years old).

Probably his favorite place to hike is Olympia National Park in Washington, where the domestic rainforest awes him every time he visits.

“The desert is beautiful, especially after a rain,” he says. “But I’m a third-generation Arizona native. Sometimes going up to just about the wettest place in the country is a fun change.” \*

When he was in high school and college, he worked as a driver. He’d get up early, run a few plant deliveries and head to class. After college, his first job at AWG was gluing pipe for a building that was part of a new expansion. He joined the watering team after that, then moved into sales. He became the sales manager at one of AWG’s satellite locations and did that for three years. Then he spent two years as propagation manager, before pivoting back into sales and eventually general manager.

“I’ve had the good fortune to do pretty much all the roles in the business, and I think I’ve liked all of them except for accounting,” he laughs. “I did seven months in accounting, and I was very excited to get

## JENNIFER MOSS

**A**t 8 a.m. each day, Jennifer Moss' phone alarm sounds and the words "strong, consistent, heart-forward" appear on the screen. These three words make up her personal and professional mission statement. It's how she shows up, no matter the place or situation.

"Heart-forward means a few things," she says. "I can be a caring person and really support your team and your people without being a pushover. It also means that I always want to leave people better than when I found them."

Whether it's an employee, a vendor, a supplier or a colleague, Jennifer is consistently upfront and transparent. She consistently withholds judgement. She consistently looks for new opportunities for her employees, for the business, for the industry and for herself. Consistency most definitely does not mean the same 'ol-same 'ol with Jennifer.

She can be strong each day thanks in part to lessons from her parents and her athletic background. Moss is a lifelong skier and competed in the Junior Olympics. She continues to use fitness to keep her body and mind strong with CrossFit and triathlon and Ragnar relay training.

"I've set a gigantic goal for myself. I'm going to be in the best shape of my life by the time I'm 40. I just turned 38 in March, so I've got time," she says. "But part of that journey is getting really strong and getting my athlete body back. I'm strong, but I want to be this bad ass who handles it like a boss. So I told myself, 'I'm doing it. There's nothing standing in my way.'"

Jennifer handles proverbial business and personal mountains in much the same way, including a serious situation that helped her become CEO of the family business.

She remembers the day, the year and even the time that changed the trajectory of her career.

"I will never forget the day we lost our largest customer in 2017. It was Feb. 16 at 2 p.m. when he walked in," she recalls. "We were doing 30% of our business with this one customer at the time. And they walked in and said, 'We're liquidating the business. I hope we told you soon enough.' And my dad sat there and said, 'I've got 70% of the seed

planted. No, you didn't tell us soon enough.' So I hit the ground running. We were in the middle of launching a wholesale houseplant program at the time, so I was already on the road trying to pitch that program," she explains. "I had to pivot very quickly and start to identify a couple of chains that we could gain to make up for the loss. That's the year I started to really earn my stripes and gain the respect of my coworkers and peers. At the end of the season, I was able to recapture 89% of the sales. It was tough. But that customer had done over a million dollars with us in 2016."

Prior to that bomb getting dropped on the company, the family (Jennifer, her parents and her brother, Dewey) had a succession planning meeting with their ag lender. The family consensus was that Dewey would eventually be named CEO.

"I agreed with them at the time that my brother, who is younger than me, was a better choice to lead the company," Jennifer says. "He was more level-headed, he was less emotional and he was more consistent. So that was the plan."

Jennifer says she responded to things emotionally and would sometimes break into tears at a business meeting.

"I wasn't projecting what I wanted to project. I wanted to come across calm, put together, direct and driven," she says. "So I really worked on changing my responses and my reactions. I was seeing a life coach, Brendon Burchard, who wrote *High Performance Habits*. It changed my life."

That's part of the reason she's now CEO.

"I outperformed the expectation, I launched myself and I earned my spot," she says.

Last summer, the family decided to change the original plan.

"My parents felt that I was the good choice for the helm of the ship. My brother and I looked at it and he agreed. And we agreed that we could make this work and he became chief operations officer. My brother is an awesome partner. Where I'm weak, he's strong, and where he's weak, I'm strong. We're a good complement to each other."

Her mom, Dana, says she's proud of how Jennifer learns from her mistakes and turns negatives into positives.

Jennifer Moss, CEO of Moss Greenhouses, eliminates the status quo and fearlessly tackles difficult situations.

# *A daring disruptor*

BY KELLI RODDA

PHOTOGRAPHY BY  
ZACK BARLETT

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“Six or seven years ago, I would have said, ‘You didn’t learn anything from this situation,’ Dana says. “But now she does and it has a lot to do with her self-growth and self-development. She pursues personal development actively so she can be the best person she can be and help others be the best they can be.”

### A meandering path

Originally, the Moss brother-and-sister team had no interest in joining the family business. They both went to college to pursue studies that had nothing to do with horticulture.

“Mom and dad never forced us to look at horticulture,” she says. “That’s why my brother and I have degrees in different areas. And dad said, ‘I want you to go out into the world and try something else. And if you want to come back to the greenhouse, then you can. But you have to want to come back. It wasn’t forced.’”

Because of the pair’s early decision not to be part of the family business, their parents formed an employee stock option program. The business is currently 35% employee owned.

When Jennifer graduated from high school, she wanted to work for the FBI.

“I wanted to chase serial killers like they do on the Criminal Minds television show. I was really into that because I competed in speech in high school, and one of my topics was DNA profiling and criminal profiling,” she says.

When Jennifer enrolled at the University of Idaho, she took a criminal justice class and was disappointed to learn of corruption in the industry.

“I was raised with integrity as a core value and I could not imagine myself going into such a corrupt industry,” she says.

Instead, Jennifer changed her focus and received two bachelor’s degrees — one in communications studies with a psychology background and another in public relations with a specialization in large event planning and organization.

“My dream job was to plan the Winter X Games,” she adds.

But she ended up getting a job selling life insurance and being a dog walker. And when people weren’t buying life insurance



Jennifer likes to ask her team and her family, “What is your win for today?” and celebrate wins both big and small.



Running the family business wasn’t part of her original plan, but her path led her back to the greenhouse.



When she became CEO, Jennifer shifted the company to be employee-centric, focusing on people first.

in the middle of a recession, she got a job at a hotel.

“I was in Portland where I didn’t have a network, but I tried it for a year. Then I called mom and dad and said, ‘Hey, I need to move home. How do you feel about a dog?’”

Jennifer and Solomon the husky returned to Idaho and Jennifer worked at a restaurant where she had a job during high school.

“They quickly promoted me to a manager and a trainer, and I worked there for a year to get my feet back under me,” she recalls.

Next, she joined the staff of a new high-end restaurant where she was hired as catering manager and was quickly promoted to assistant manager.

“Candidly, that was the worst job I’ve ever had. However, it taught me a lot,” she says. “Those hard jobs are actually really good for you. They build character

and you learn what you can do and what you’re not willing to tolerate. It was at that job where I was put in a couple of situations that I could not stomach. Going back to that core value of integrity, I put in my two-weeks’ notice. That’s when I went to my parents and said, ‘Let’s give it a go at the greenhouse.’”

She was hired as a retail assistant manager then moved to the marketing department.

“The hardest part about coming from restaurant and hospitality management into the greenhouse is, in a restaurant, dinner’s on the table and if the customer’s upset, you have to solve it right then. And when I saw an issue at the greenhouse, I’d say, ‘We need to change this.’ Since I came on in January and our fiscal year is September through August, I’d hear, ‘No, we don’t need to talk about that for eight or 10 months.’

“I’m like, excuse me, what? But I

didn’t understand the seasonality, that kind of process. That the minute hand has to go all the way around the clock. You can’t make a decision at 7 that affects 2. And so I just had to learn to slow down. That was probably the hardest transition.”

Since coming to the family business in 2011, Jennifer has worked on the retail side, handled marketing tasks, worked in wholesale production and plant sales, and became director of sales and marketing.

**Strengths and superpowers**

As she navigated her way through the different departments of the family business and learned how to better channel her emotions, Jennifer honed her self-awareness, which she calls a “superpower.”

“I went through a period where I was just the boss’ daughter for a long time, yet my brother didn’t have that stigma of being just the boss’ son. And it pissed me off. That’s when I became more aware of

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what and how I was projecting things,” she explains.

She began to recognize and sharpen her strengths, which was the catalyst to her successfully turning around that million-dollar customer loss.

“And my competitive athlete background taught me to ask, ‘What is your win?’ So I started finding those small wins, even in the hard days,” she says.

She also learned a tremendous amount from her parents, mostly by example. She also inherited their workaholic tendencies.

“Our parents taught us about hard work and consistency. They showed up. They were driven, even in the hard years, the really good years and the completely average years,” she says. “They showed me that you dive in during the spring, you kick ass, then you get to enjoy your summers and winters. And take the time, get offsite, use your vacation days. I’m still not very good at that part.”

“My mom showed me how to generate trust with people and to have faith in your decisions. My father taught me how to lead a team and how to hold people accountable. With my mom’s softer approach combined with my father’s drive for results, I developed a hidden talent I didn’t realize I had until the last year, which is building teams and creating loyalty in my employees,” she says.

Jennifer doesn’t run from conflict; she runs at it.

“I tackle hard things. And if it’s really hard, I just dig my feet in a little bit deeper so that I’m completely anchored. I’m not afraid to do hard things at all,” she says. “I have no problem with change. I disarm the emotional fear of it and other hard things, and I just keep moving. I think that’s probably a lot of people’s hardest moments – when they get stalled with indecision and fear. I read an incredible book earlier this year called *The Gap and the Gain*. And being an engineer’s daughter, everything’s a math equation. I just have to figure out the right variables to solve for X. And I approach all of life like that.”

Jennifer doesn’t fear failing, either.

“I’ve learned that failing forward is the best way to approach it. Failure doesn’t

disarm me, it doesn’t scare me. I tell my employees that if you don’t fail forward, the universe will continue to bring you that lesson and it will get harder and harder every time. So when something bad happens, don’t ask, ‘Why did this happen to me?’ Ask, ‘Why is this happening for me?’”

During situations where certain things can’t be controlled, Jennifer has learned she can control herself, her actions and her attitude.

“If something really hard comes in front of me, I ask myself, ‘Will this matter in a year? In five years? In 10 years? And if the answer is no to any of those questions, then I need to make sure I’m not giving it too much energy in that moment,” she explains.

Jennifer has also learned the power of the word no.

“That has been a really hard lesson, though,” she says. “I had FOMO — fear of missing out. I wanted to be in all places and all things. But that’s not the case anymore. I know where I stand as a human. I know what I want to show up for, and I know how much currency I have in the tank to be able to accomplish things.”

It all goes back to her superpower of self-awareness.

“When I was managing the restaurant, I had to make very big decisions on the fly. And I didn’t have a super strong mentor in that space, per se. I didn’t have a bad one, they were a little bit more passive. And because of that, I was abrasive in my management, and I would anger easily. And that trickled into the greenhouse for a little while. I started to pay a lot more attention to how I was showing up to conversations. What was my body language, was my tone of voice right or how did I leave people feeling? And I have really worked on that over the last four or five years and fine-tuned it.”

It’s also crucial to listen to others and let them point out shortcomings.

“The person who runs the wholesale office has been with us for 20 years. When I took over as a director of sales and marketing in September of 2018, she told me her biggest fear was that I was going to have a bad day and fire everybody. It really helped



Jennifer challenged her brokers and suppliers to help the greenhouse be two years ahead of the market. She’s trialing plant material early to not only be that much ahead when the plant is released, but also make sure it will perform well in Idaho’s harsh environment.

me say, okay, hold on, this isn’t a bad comment. This is a lesson. There’s an opportunity for growth here. And so I dove in and I really took a different approach.

“I worked on walking away and taking a couple of hours to come back with a clear head. My brother is very good at this. I really started to practice that. And that huge miss became a huge win. And it’s very unusual for me to get angry now. I can still hold people accountable, and we can walk away from a situation after a positive conversation where we all feel that we succeeded in being heard and solved the situation.”

Jennifer had a similar experience with a retail manager.

“They said, ‘You always bring me step



five and you make me figure out one through four. If you could please include me so that I can be a part of all five steps.' They were absolutely right. I was giving them directives without the right tools. I've really listened to those moments because if I'm managing one person like that, am I managing all people like that?"

### **Disruptions and new directions**

Jennifer is a self-described disruptor.

"I do not like the status quo. I am a person who holds space for everyone and I don't make judgments," she says.

Challenging the status quo took center stage after they lost their big customer in 2017.

"Our offerings as a supplier were very

traditional. When we lost King's Discount Store, it was an opportunity in disguise. We started to change our basket combinations and move away from that flat footprint into more container gardening with more perceived value on the baskets," she explains. "We had a mono-crop approach to our smaller 10-inch baskets, and at that time we were growing about 35,000 of them a season. They consisted of just one petunia color and we made the shift into adding two colors. But we had to do it slowly because a lot of our customers have worked with us for three generations of my family. And they expect the same thing from Moss all the time. So we split the crop in half and kept half a mono color and grew the other half with two colors.

And then we started messing with the combinations even more. Now we have a lot more diversity in our mixes and we evolved faster.

"I think it was in 2018 at Cultivate where I challenged all of our brokers and suppliers saying, 'I want to be two years ahead of the market. I want to try everything I can in Idaho before you release it.' I want to be on point as soon as that new variety hits the market."

It's that relevancy that keeps customers coming back to Moss Greenhouses.

"Moss has always grown our annuals for special projects that we have going here in Ontario [Oregon]. Even though Jennifer has many, many balls that she keeps in the air, she never fails to be avail-



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able — never,” says Susan Kurth, owner of Andrews Seed Co. “She has worked tirelessly on behalf of all of us in the nursery business to keep things relevant and up with the trends. In my experience, she grows some of the best products with the most selection of any grower that I have dealt with.”

Jennifer took a big leap when she disrupted the focus of the company. “I was named CEO in September of 2022 and we’ve made some big shifts. We have gone from focusing on top-quality plants to becoming an employee-centric company. My best asset is people and I want to treat that asset the best way possible,” she says.

She’s creating a “safe space” for employees where there’s “no fear and no anger.”

“When my staff comes to me with an issue, I solve, I don’t blame or finger point. And if they start to blame or finger point, I de-charge them immediately. I say, ‘None of that matters right now. The problem is here, let’s fix it.’ And then when everything settles, I come back and ask how we can prevent this in the future. I learned a valuable lesson from my tattoo artist. There are two things in life: there are tasks and there are relationships.”

Jennifer attended leadership training, and one of speakers was Brian Canlis who owns Canlis Restaurants, a highly successful company in Seattle. He shared how he has a two-hour meeting every week with six people and how everyone at that table during those two hours is equal.

“I knew this was something we could do. Because employee engagement is the



A team from Moss Greenhouses attends the Colorado State field trials each year to find many of its plants because of the state’s similar growing environment.

hardest thing as an owner, without question, for them to buy into your mission, your values and how you do business. We created what is called the Moss Captain’s Table. And every person at that table for one hour, once a week, are all equals. And the captain is not always me. It rotates for every meeting, and it has created more teamwork and more buy-in than I’ve ever seen from my team.

Now, there’s another side of it. Some people say, ‘Why didn’t I get invited to the table?’ I can’t make everybody happy, but if we’re not dealing with any confidential issues, and somebody can’t make it, they can designate a person to stand in for them. That way we kind of demystify what happens at that table. And that’s been tremendously helpful in building trust in new ownership and in our processes. For instance, it could be the loading guy in the basketball shorts with sleeves ripped off his t-shirt and tattoos up to his neck saying, ‘Man, I just listened to this incredible leadership podcast’ and he goes into how we could adopt that process or that philosophy. I’m always wowed. It’s brought the bar up and on a consistent basis. And it wasn’t me lifting the bar, it was our employees. And that is incredible.”

Jennifer says no matter how long

you’ve been a leader or whatever your background may be, “don’t be afraid to be a disruptor and ask the hard questions.”

“Don’t be afraid to put the guy with 30 years of experience on the bench and let him consult a group of younger folks to lead a project and challenge the status quo,” she advises. “If you are going to get people interested in this industry, it can’t continue to look how it’s always looked. It’s okay if everybody’s skin color is different at a table. It’s okay if half of the people in the board room are covered in tattoos. It’s okay if someone came from the cannabis industry and is now growing lettuce in a vertical farm. We’ve got to be able to cross over into the next stage of this industry’s evolution.”

Jennifer is very intentional about diversifying the industry after an unfortunate incident at a trade show.

“I went into a supplier’s booth and stood there, ignored, for about 20 minutes, despite having 12 workers in the booth,” she explains. “It was right when the show floor opened, and they weren’t busy. I now call it the khakis and polo club because that’s what every one of those guys were wearing. It’s the traditional footprint of so many in our industry, but I don’t participate. I’m tattooed. I’m young. I’m female. So was like, ‘Okay, here’s a bias.’ So now I’m very sensitive to the gender gap in our industry.”

To combat that gender gap (or any other type of gap), Jennifer sticks to her three-word mission: She stays strong, consistent and heart-forward.

“That’s something I value in a leader — somebody who has heart. They have their heart in it, and they care while still being consistent, strong and business-oriented. That’s hugely valuable to me in every single way. And that’s how I want to show up at that table and every other table that has an opportunity for growth, anywhere, in any industry, in any room.”



Moss Greenhouses has both a wholesale and a retail operation with wholesale making up about 85% of the business.

# NOMINATE AN OUTSTANDING LEADER

## FOR THE HILA CLASS OF 2024

**R**emarkable leaders have great faith in their vision and their employees. They listen intently, they encourage others and they're honest. Rosalynn Carter said, "A leader takes people where they want to go. A great leader takes people where they don't necessarily want to go, but ought to be."

Each year, *Greenhouse Management* and *Nursery Management*, with the support of Syngenta, honor six green-industry professionals who exemplify the leadership qualities needed to inspire and empower those around them and who work toward the betterment of the entire industry.

Who in the industry has inspired you?

Nominate them for a Horticultural Industries Leadership Award!

HILA is the only North American awards program to recognize recipients' exemplary contributions to the horticulture industry, such as:

- contributing to its development with their innovation and expertise

- excelling in environmental stewardship
- enhancing the lives of employees, customers, communities and the industry at large with their charitable giving

making a positive impact on the industry  
"The green industry is full of considerate and compassionate people who care deeply for their employees, their community and their colleagues," says Kelli Rodda, editorial director. "It's a tremendous privilege to not only honor these industry leaders, but to learn and share their stories each year."

"The HILAs provide a perfect opportunity to acknowledge the efforts of extraordinary individuals in our industry," says Nick Collins, publisher. "We want to thank our long-time sponsor, Syngenta, for their continued support in helping bring the HILAs to the greenhouse and nursery markets."

We will begin accepting nominations for the HILA Class of 2023 beginning Oct. 1. In the meantime, visit our website, [hila.hortgroupevents.com](http://hila.hortgroupevents.com), to read about past winners.

## PAST WINNERS

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