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Features

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Learning From Each Other

Jennifer Polanz

Everyone has something to learn, no matter how experienced (or old) we become. That's never been truer than it is today, when the younger generation has much to tell us about work/life balance, time management and technology. Here you'll meet our three finalists for this year's *Green Profit*/The Garden Center Group Young Retailer Award and read their responses to this year's essay question asking about those topics.

Put it in your calendar now and join us this year at Cultivate'24 in Columbus to hear our winner announced at the Unplugged Event, Monday, July 15 at GasWerks, 487 Park Street. Don't miss your chance to meet these fine folks in person!



McKenzie Lain
Age: 28
Title: General Manager
Operation: Watters Garden Center—Prescott, Arizona

When considering what my generation can teach the garden industry about time management and work/life balance, it's important to realize that it is multifaceted. We need to think about how systems play a role in this balance—systems meaning automation, planning budgets and managing inventory. Being able to not react to problems, but know they're coming and plan for them. It can bring freedom to be able to switch between our work lives and personal lives. We can grow our team with training videos, gatherings and leading by example to help them learn more quickly and gain confidence.

Finally, it helps to know that we go through seasons in this industry with highs and lows. It's easy to give 110% during peak times when you know there's a light at the end of the tunnel. Realizing the season will change; there will be a time for what's essential, such as family travel or hobbies.

Before diving deeper into the question, giving insight into my background is essential. Having been born on the tail end of the Millennials, I grew up in a time where you were a part of nature while also being shaped by the technological age. Another influence was being a part of a small family business in a small, quiet town. My grandparents started the company and my parents grew it to where it is today. I found my identity by obtaining my B.S. in Psychology at a college out of state. Followed by my Master of Marriage and Family Therapy in California. I finished my Master's right as COVID was hitting its worst, and like so many others, my plans changed. I fell back in love with my small town and my family's garden center.

Working as a third-generation owner of Watters Garden Center is a nerve-racking experience; wanting a happy medium of work/life balance is one that's constantly on my mind. Times are changing quickly. We're continually surrounded by different media platforms, each with a different generational voice. It's worth considering what we can take from previous generations in discovering work ethic and time management.

Creating space and a balanced life comes with learning to put efficiency and automation into place. Task prioritization helps team members learn to do things for themselves instead of waiting for management to tell them how to work and what to do every second of the day. At Watters, we can track customer data and sales trends to see where to allocate resources effectively. We schedule managers efficiently, so there are only one or two on any given day, possibly more during peak times, such as weekends. The office staff does weekly inventory checks to track which departments are performing best and which need assistance in increasing numbers. We implement open-to-buys so managers know how much to order weekly without asking for permission. Monthly budgets created by the department reduce my stress and the buyer's worry about restocking and orders each week.

Chatbots take the pressure off my time; we call him "AI Ken." When my team can't reach the phone or answer website questions in time, AI Ken answers simple daily questions like, What do we have in stock? What are the gallon sizes? When is the best time to plant? AI Ken frees up the team. Hence, they have more face-to-face customer interactions, allowing them to increase sales while scaling customer service.

Overall, creating these systems helps our team stay on track and maximize their potential by managing their time and freeing up their personal lives. Automation in inventory and planning for the month gives us the freedom to explore life outside of work. It also assists in reducing stress and anxiety in the workplace, leaning instead on what we planned and prepared for last winter. Detailed monthly inventory and staffing budgets, supplemented by automation, create the freedom to explore life beyond.

In this technological age, we also apply collaboration and communication tools. Implementing "Watters ShareSpace," a collaborative communication tool for the Watters team, significantly reduced team members contacting me outside of work. This internal internet site confidently guides the team members in their daily jobs. A confident team provides a better customer experience. I post weekly training and uplifting videos from the owners on the team page. It encourages the team to grow their product knowledge and customers' primary focus of the week. They access schedules, training modules, weekly marketing messages and more. Watters ShareSpace is a game-changer for staff morale while balancing my personal life.

It's essential to emphasize again that this industry is seasonal. We give 110% during the peak customer weeks—or that surprise truck during the garden season—while keeping the energy up and the environment fun, showing up to take pride in the business when the demand is at its highest. We need to know that when we push through the chaos, there comes a time of recovery when our personal lives have the spotlight. We can spend time with family, learn new hobbies and travel to new places—all the activities we love.

Sometimes, work can feel like it eats up all our time and thoughts; automation helps us complete day-to-day tasks, lowering our workload of things to accomplish in a given day. Finding ways to create balance can help bring joy, fulfillment and mental clarity to our lives.



Zachary Pitchford
Age: 34
Title: Chief Executive Officer/Owner
Operation: Wilcox Nursery & Landscape—Largo, Florida

In today's fast-paced world, the concept of time management and work/life balance has become increasingly crucial for maintaining productivity, satisfaction and overall well-being, especially in a dynamic retail and service garden center. As a young professional, I believe that there are invaluable enhancements my generation can impart to the garden center industry regarding these essential aspects of life. Through effective time management, and a balanced approach to work and personal life, I think businesses in the garden center industry can unlock greater effectiveness, employee satisfaction and long-term success.

First, let's delve into the significance of time management. In my garden center, where tasks range from inventory and online order management to customer service and sales, design, installation and maintenance, time is undeniably a precious resource. And I think many people or organizations immediately home in on ways to make tasks more efficient so we can get as much done in a day as possible. Although very important, I don't find this to be the most important attribute for proper time management as it relates to a work/life balance. Instead, we aim to focus on prioritizing the tasks that are most effective at any given hour, day or week. This could be prioritizing a large tree purchase rather than three or four very small orders. Each of these customers are important to us, but the most effective starting point is the large order. Likewise, our landscape crew may be short a crew member and need to adjust their daily tasks and goals on-site to get the most important items completed, rather than everything. The ability to discern and prioritize the most important tasks leads to symbolically larger achievements at a lower energy expense.

Moreover, the concept of work/life balance is paramount in today's workforce. As a young professional, I've witnessed firsthand the detrimental effects of burnout and chronic stress on individuals and organizations alike. In the garden center industry, where physical labor and customer interaction are central, maintaining a healthy work/life balance can significantly impact employee morale, retention rates and overall performance. My generation emphasizes the need for employers to foster a supportive culture that values employees' well-being and encourages boundaries between work and personal life. This isn't to say that there aren't tough and demanding schedules during our busiest times, but if we analyze those and try to implement adjustments for similar future scenarios, maybe we can see improvement.

One crucial lesson my generation can teach the garden center industry is the importance of flexibility and adaptability. In a rapidly evolving business landscape, rigid adherence to traditional work structures may hinder growth and innovation. Young professionals seem to thrive in environments that embrace change, experimentation and continuous learning. By encouraging a culture of flexibility and empowering employees to explore new ideas and approaches, garden centers can stay ahead of the curve and remain competitive in an ever-changing market. But I would warn too much experimentation and change can be exhausting, too. Management should really embrace the power of time to allow things to adjust and play out before implementing more change.

Additionally, my generation understands the power of technology in enhancing productivity and collaboration. From inventory management systems to online marketing platforms, digital tools offer unparalleled opportunities for streamlining operations and reaching a broader customer base. By embracing technology and providing employees with the necessary training and resources, garden centers can leverage digital solutions to optimize workflows, improve customer experiences and drive business growth. To connect all departments of our operation, we utilize Slack as a way to communicate. This helps with overall organization, keeps thoughts and discussions from being lost in an email chain, and also allows management to monitor daily events quickly and precisely.

Furthermore, my generation values diversity, inclusion and work/life integration. We recognize that employees have diverse backgrounds, interests and responsibilities outside of work. By promoting a culture of inclusivity and offering flexible PTO and sick days, we help to make sure our organization is showing that we care about each of our employees' lives outside of work. This past year, we've also started a 401(k) plan with employer matching. In the ever-evolving complexities of our economic turbulence, knowing that a cushion is being built for retirement is so important.

In conclusion, as a young professional, I firmly believe that my generation has much to offer the garden center industry in terms of time management and work/life balance. By prioritizing effectiveness, embracing flexibility, leveraging technology and fostering a supportive work culture, garden centers can not only enhance productivity and profitability, but also create a fulfilling and sustainable work environment for employees. As the industry evolves, embracing these principles will be key to unlocking success and staying ahead in an increasingly competitive market.



Jake Scott
Age: 32
Title: General Manager
Operation: Piedmont Feed & Garden Center—Chapel Hill, North Carolina

Growing up, I witnessed first-hand the dedication and work ethic of two Baby Boomer entrepreneurial parents who both still work hard in the day-to-day operations of their respective small businesses. My parents poured themselves into their business, providing for our family while encouraging my brother and me to pursue our dreams. Now, as a 32-year-old business manager, I'm following their example while also understanding that success doesn't have to come at the expense of my personal life. With a focus on time management and work/life balance, I can still learn from generations before me, but lower the risk of burnout and stress that often comes in the fast-paced and demanding field of a garden center.

One way I became more efficient at managing my time was by taking advantage of the resources at my fingertips and simply trying new methods or ideas. I think back to when I first joined the team at PFGC. I had to learn the daily logistics already in place and identify areas where I could implement positive changes. I spent the first couple of weeks observing and shadowing in all areas of our business—from how the garden center staff handled unloading and retailing plants to the effectiveness of the point-of-sale (POS) system. Immediately, I picked up on things that could be done more efficiently and started trying new policies and procedures. The staff and owner were hesitant at first, as change can be hard, but I asked everyone to give things a try. Not all of my suggestions were successful or had a positive impact, but most of them resulted in improved operational efficiency business-wide.

One successful change was streamlining how the staff was managing their daily tasks by utilizing the technology that so many of them struggled to go more than a few minutes without: cellphones. With some research, I found an app called Connecteam that allows me to break down larger tasks—such as the garden center daily list—into smaller, more manageable tasks that the staff can check off as they complete each one. The satisfaction they get from checking off a task on the app has improved efficiency and helps them stay on track and maintain a sense of progress.

Another important aspect of time management that my generation values is the ability to balance work and personal life. We recognize the importance of taking time for ourselves, whether that means pursuing hobbies, spending time

with friends and family, or simply taking a break from work. In the garden center industry, this can be a challenge, as we're often required to work long hours and weekends during peak seasons. However, as a manager, I take steps to help my employees (and myself) maintain a healthy work/life balance. For us, this includes offering flexible schedules, as well as encouraging employees to take breaks and prioritize self-care.

Years ago, when I started working in the garden center industry, there was a common mentality when hiring staff that weekends are required. I realized a few years back that with proper communication as a team and direction from me as a manager, we can have a successful garden center with flexible schedules that may exclude some from working on the weekend. This allows those with small children to support their little ones in their weekend spring soccer league while giving a job to a high school student who can only work Saturdays and Sundays.

The morale of our employees is higher when they have a healthy work/life balance. As I was filling a few vacant positions earlier this year, I found many younger applicants advocated for themselves when it came to this balance. My lead cashier told me in her interview, "My husband works Monday to Friday and to keep our work/life balance in check, I am only looking for a weekday job." While it was tempting to say, "But I need you on Saturdays, our busiest day of the week," I instead told her how much respect I had for her in the fact that she advocated for herself. In the end, my anxiety about her not being here on the weekends was easily resolved by hiring a few college students to handle Saturday and Sunday, where they excel.

In my own life, I have to take time to step away from the business and do things that I enjoy. As I'm sitting down to write this on a Thursday amid the spring season, I'm reminded that taking Thursdays off allows me to rest before a busy weekend of events at the store. Stepping away to attend a conference or market in the off-season provides an opportunity for me to reconnect with industry professionals and allows me to bring back new and exciting ideas to my team. Having a healthy balance between work and my personal life helps me feel more fulfilled and energized in both areas. It allows time for me to focus on my health, hobbies and relationships, which are all important for overall happiness and satisfaction. I feel a good work/life balance helps me remain focused and perform better when I'm not constantly feeling overwhelmed. The world doesn't fall apart because I'm not there on Thursday and none of us have to carry the weight of the world (or business) on our shoulders all the time.

Overall, the importance of time management and work/life balance cannot be overstated in today's fast-paced and demanding garden center industry. By building upon the work ethic of my parents' generation and pairing that with the efficiency and balance of my generation, we can create a more productive and sustainable work environment for our employees and ourselves.

Meet the 2024 Judges

Bill McCurry—*Green Profit* columnist and owner of McCurry Associates consulting firm
Kate Terrell—President of Wallace's Garden Center in Bettendorf, Iowa (and former YRA nominee)
Danny Summers—Executive Director of The Garden Center Group
Michael Fiore—Vice President of Smith's Gardentown in Wichita Falls, Texas, and 2023 YRA Winner

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