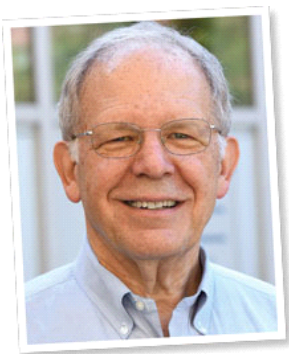


7/1/2024

## Young Retailers Make Changes for the Better

*Bill McCurry*



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It's time to take a break from the routine and look at the amazing future of our industry as evidenced by a passionate, younger generation that's growing into our garden centers.

Having interviewed the 2024 *Green Profit*/The Garden Center Group Young Retailer Award finalists, it's evident one of our industry's strengths is the people we're attracting to join us. They're attracted in large part by the environmental and societal benefits horticulture offers.

There are three finalists in the Young Retailer Award process that you can read more about in the June issue (visit [greenprofit.com](https://greenprofit.com)). Here are my insights from interviewing them.

They all mentioned their personal and business focus on native plants. Owner Zack Pitchford (Wilcox Nursery & Landscape, Largo, Florida) said, "As an industry I loved already I learned I could love it so much more because now I'm working with plants that have a totally different aesthetic, but that are good for the environment. They're reducing our water, fertilizer and insecticide usages, while improving the wildlife in people's landscapes. With birds, butterflies and all the other pollinators, we're giving people 'living yards' that are beyond just the landscape."

General Manager McKenzie Lain (Watters Garden Center, Prescott, Arizona) includes rain harvesting in her customer conversations. "New people coming to high desert want gardens. They recognize our weather patterns and handle them with native plants. There are a lot of these where water doesn't seem to be an issue. We help customers learn to harness our monsoons and storms by rain harvesting on their property."

Prescott gets a lot of rain in July and August, so having customers harvesting and storing it for dry times alleviates them using costly or rationed water.

Upcoming Young Retailers are taking traditional beliefs and morphing them into what works in the contemporary world. General Manager Jake Scott (Piedmont Feed & Garden Center, Chapel Hill, North Carolina) believes in keeping the same crew year-round. "I'd much rather have an employee I've trained and nurtured through an entire year, who has seen the busiest and slowest parts of the year, but stuck with us. I'd rather have an employee like that than needing to train new people every single spring just because of the need to furlough people in the off season."

He uses these strategies to accomplish this:

- Hiring retired people, who understand and want to work in the peak season before taking the rest of the year off
- Hiring people who can balance their annual spending patterns, working a lot during the season with reduced income in the off times

Zack emphasized natives and supporting the local environment, which reinforces employees' sense that their job is making Florida an ecologically better place.

Zack has recently started a 401(k) for Wilcox employees, ignoring the commonly held theory young people don't think about retirement.

Zack told me, "We hire a lot of young people who hear about crypto, meme stocks and retirement. I think that's really driven a lot of awareness in young people about saving/investing for the future. I know when we started it, both my managers thanked me."

The Wilcox plan administrator helps employees understand retirement planning, making it easy for employees to start. Download an app on your phone, connect to your bank account and you're enrolled.

Jake reminds us to be flexible and embrace change, sometimes from places you might not expect. "Our job is to educate customers and supply them with plants that are going to make them successful. When they're successful, we're successful. Our selections must change. People want us to have what's trending on their phones."

Change is constant and will remain with us. Having engaged passionate Young Retailers will ensure the long-term success of our industry. We salute them. **GP**

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*Bill would love to hear from you with questions, comments or ideas for future columns. Please contact him at [wmccurry@mccurryassoc.com](mailto:wmccurry@mccurryassoc.com) or (609) 731-8389.*