

An Obit; Two Notable Closings; Opinions on Glowing Petunias



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COMING UP THIS WEEK:

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In memoriam: David Lemon



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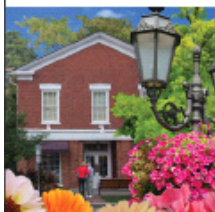
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David Lemon, one of our industry's most well-known and prolific flower breeders, passed away February 10 at the age of 89. Nicknamed "Marigold Man" by British gardener Christopher Lloyd, he could also be called "Pelargonium Man" or "Sweet Pea Man," said one writer.

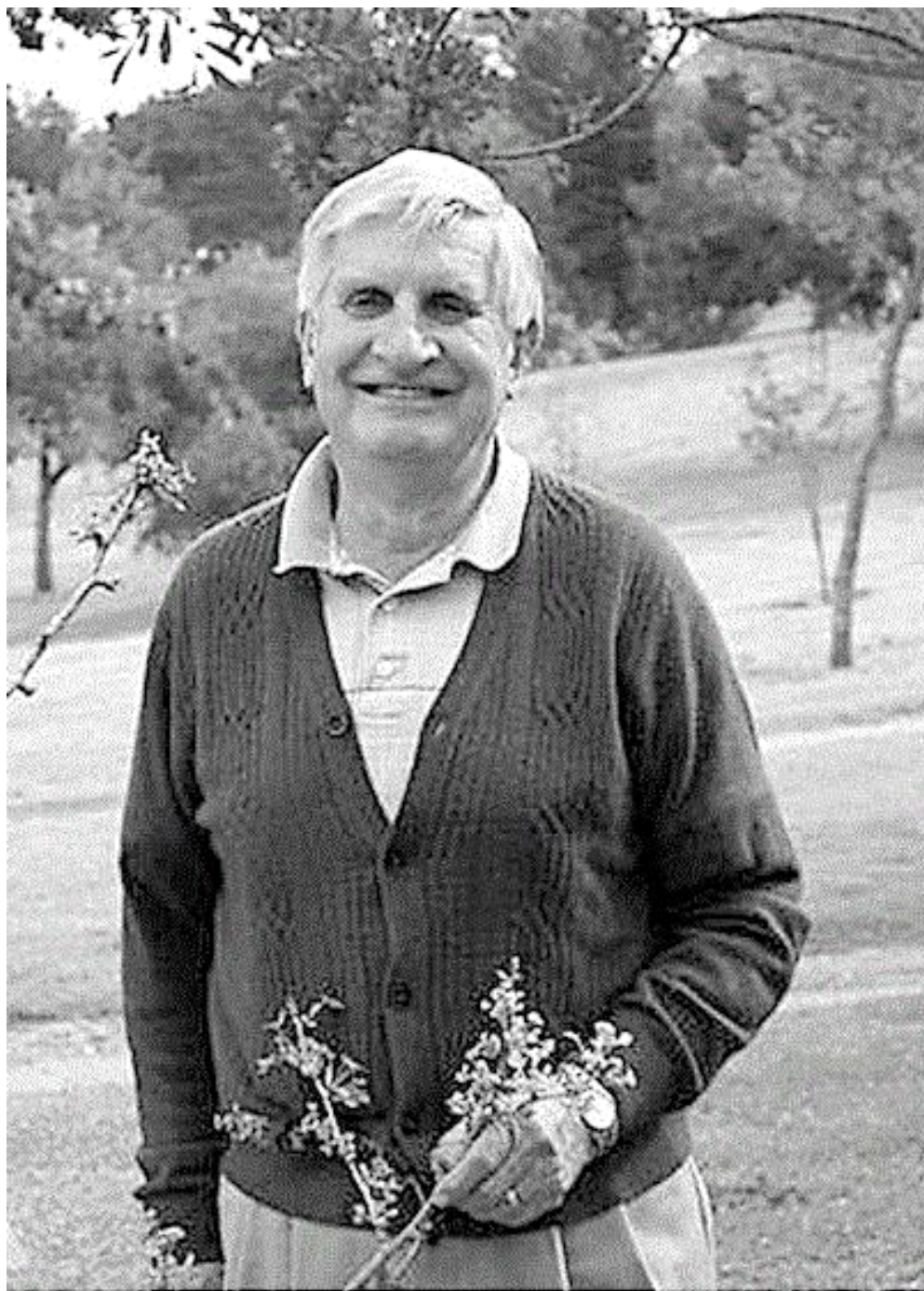


Photo: David Cook

Born in Dublin, Ireland, David began his horticultural training at the Dublin Botanical Garden, but he went to England for an honors diploma at the Royal Horticultural Society's garden at Wisley. He began his professional career in 1955, working at London's Watkins & Simpson seed company before moving to California in 1964. Settling in Lompoc, a hotbed of flower seed breeding and production, he developed new varieties for Burpee, Denholm, Ball, Bodger, Oglevee and its successor, Ecke Ranch.

He devoted himself to the French marigold for many years, introducing such series as Bonanza, Hero, Little Hero, Safari and Disco. His work was recognized in 1985 by All-America Selections with their Medallion of Honor award, and again in 2006 with their Breeders Cup award for his

lifetime of breeding achievements. The varieties David bred in marigolds, geraniums and sweet peas set new standards for the classes. One of his marigolds, Showboat, was a Triple Crown winner, earning AAS, Fleuroselect and All-Britain Trials awards. He also served as AAS President in 1981 and 1982.

"This was nice to get this particular award, but I had some good teachers," he said of the honor.

For many years, I saw David each April at Bodger or Oglevee in Lompoc during Pack Trials, and enjoyed visiting with him—he was as charming and gentle a man as you could ever meet. Humble almost to a fault, you would never know just how knowledgeable and prolific he was. In fact, I wish I'd spent more time with him learning the history of the companies and varieties he was involved with for so many years. I know many of you in the seed world have fond memories of David. Feel free to share them [HERE](#).

(David's history courtesy Pacific Horticulture magazine and the article "The Marigold in California" by Judith Taylor)



White's to close their wholesale operation

They say that all good things must come to an end, and that's how I choose to view this news item:

White's Nursery & Greenhouse, founded by one of the most venerated individuals in floriculture, Norm White, and run today by Norm and his daughter, Dana, and son, Tal, is closing. Why? The same story we've been hearing from other growers: a capital- and labor-intensive industry, reduced customer demand, rising interest rates and a lender who no longer wants to be involved in agriculture, says Tal White.

Tal told me in a phone interview, "Low demand in 2023 led to the most challenging year we've had—more challenging, honestly, than what we had during COVID." And to top it off, their lender decided not to continue their line of credit. So they had to make the tough call that, after 68 years, they'll close the wholesale side of the business. Their last wholesale crops will be some pansies, Easter crops, and spring annuals.

The good news is that they do intend to continue to operate their retail garden center, White's Old Mill Garden Center, along with an internet fulfillment service.

Also good news: With 56 acres of prime Chesapeake, Virginia, land attracting developers from across the country, they should have no problem raising the funds to pay off any debts and move forward.

I asked Tal about the loss of financing. How can that happen to such an established and respected business?

"You're only as good as your last year" in the eyes of a lender looking to renew a line of credit, he answered. He added that they'd reached out to potential partners, but he says their business model—club-format stores and grocery chains—does not seem to be as enticing as the big box/DIY stores.

"I just don't feel we're as attractive a company to partner with simply because we're not dealing with Home Depot, Lowe's and Walmart," he said.

Once 100% weekly potted plants, especially the pot mums for which Norm became famous, White's had been evolving their product mix over the last 20 years to meet the changing market.

In 2000, they were 50/50 potted flowering plants and annuals; today they're "an annual grower that happens to do some potted flowering," says Tal. "But the potted flowering isn't sustainable. The demand isn't there and the market isn't there."

"We've been constantly moving into new market channels for the last 20 years to match where we could find the most sales. But you've got to fill the greenhouses up to make money. And if you fill them up and don't sell it all, you lose money." Tal added that sales were looking good for this season. But then the lender backed out.

I asked Tal how his dad, who started the business with his wife, Hetty, in 1956, was handling the decision.

"Well, you know, it's his legacy," Tal answered. "He started the business on his father's property. It's a big change. He's not happy with it, for sure. But we've done everything we could to increase market share."

As for the future, that hinges on what a potential developer wants to do with the property. They've had "strong offers," but working through the details of how a developer wants to use the site, and whether an adjacent retail garden center fits in or not, will take time.

"The goal is to continue on," Tal says. "We've been growing and selling plants forever. But you have to work through the details of what the developer wants."

With 56 acres of land to sell, there could be enough to start over, even if on a small scale. Would Tal and Dana ever consider buying a piece of land elsewhere, maybe western Virginia, and building a new White's Nursery?

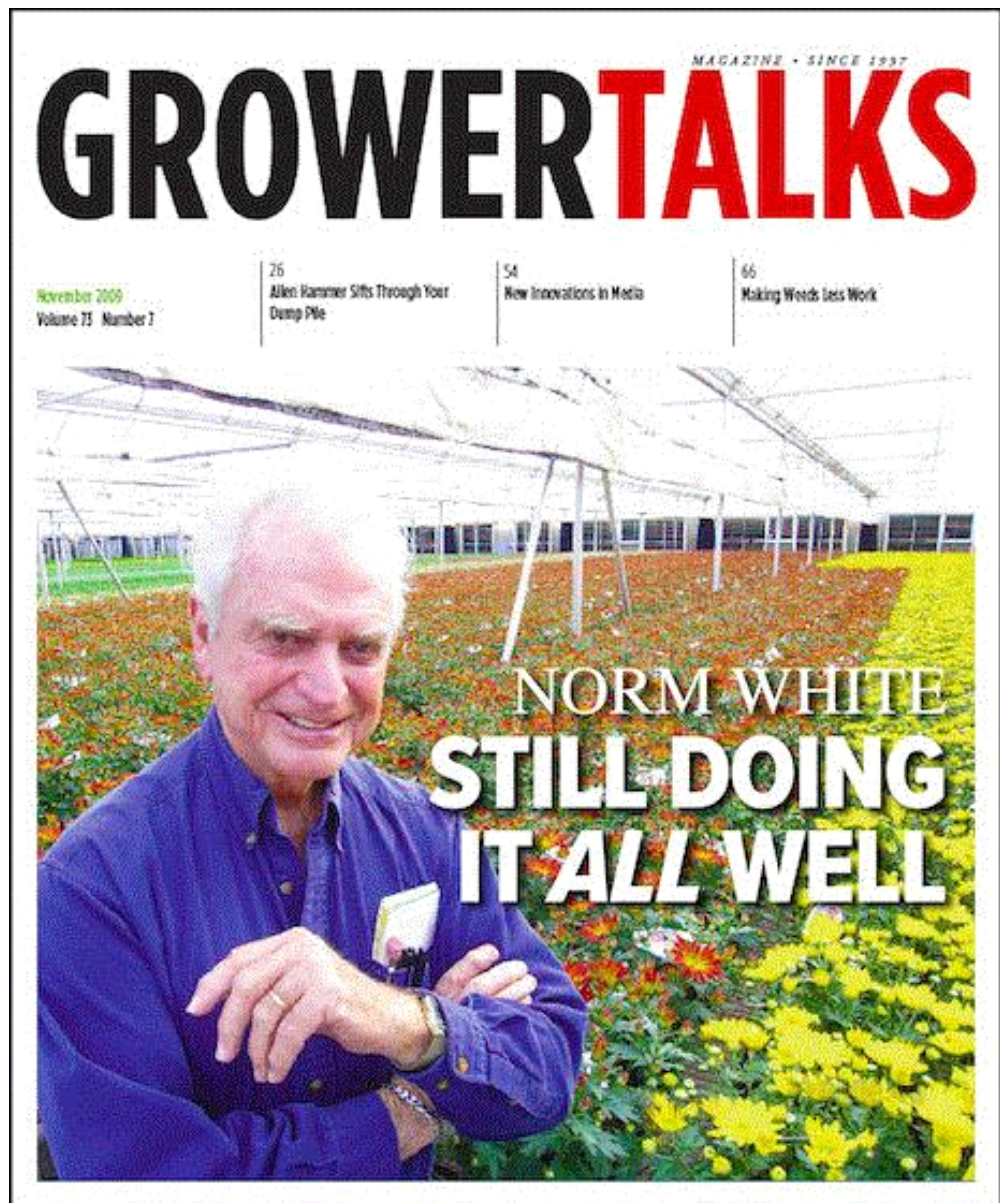
Tal considered briefly.

"I wouldn't say it's out of the realm of possibility," he said, adding that he and Dana would love the opportunity to continue to run the business.

Norm's long history with *GrowerTalks*

I visited Norm several times over the years; on one visit, in 2009, I put him on the cover of *GrowerTalks* for his fifth time—more than any other grower. In fact, I'm not sure if any have been on it even twice.

The late Vic Ball, long-time editor of *GrowerTalks*, "discovered" Norm, and was a huge fan. Vic wrote in September 1974, on the occasion of Norm's first appearance in the magazine, "Norm White does it all well." (35 years later, I modified that headline slightly, below).



He was featured on the cover again in 1975 and 1979, talking about bedding plants, pot mum disbudding, even tomatoes. In 1985, Vic wrote a feature story on "Norm White and his Great Mums." Vic opened with:

"You've got to see it to appreciate it! Norm White's Nursery and Greenhouse, Chesapeake, Virginia, near-perfect uniformity and quality, the spic-and-span cleanliness of it all, the acres of ever-so-colorful 4 1/2-in. and 6 1/2-in. mums—all adds up to the epitome of pot plant growing."

But business was already getting tough for White's when I visited almost 15 years ago. As I wrote then, "After 53 years in the business, Norm still does it all well. And his business, now grown to 20 acres, is still spic-and-span. But as you'll hear from him, 2009 is a lot tougher than the '70s and '80s when Vic was reporting."

Then we talked poinsettias, with Norm saying, "This year we cut it back a little bit. We're doing about 50,000 10 inch, only about 11,000 8 inch and we're doing about 130,000 of the 6 1/2 inch and 6 inch. And we're still painting probably 75%."

I asked, "Why the reduction in numbers?"

Replied Norm, "Last year was a disaster. What happened, [retailers] took the first two orders, they didn't take the last one. So that left one-third of the crop on the bench. Nothing to do with it except walk out Christmas morning and cry. (Laughs) You're supposed to see empty benches

and you don't, so it was pretty tough last year ... it was a tough season."

Got thoughts on the overall state of the greenhouse business for mid-sized businesses like White's? Share them [HERE](#).



Skagit Gardens to close

Here's the second closing of the week, on the opposite coast, Mount Vernon, Washington. I'll print their official short-and-not-so-sweet press announcement verbatim:

Notice of closing:

Skagit Horticulture LLC will be discontinuing operations April 7th, 2024. While we have managed through many challenges, current economic issues including market pressures, production cost, energy cost, freight cost and the business climate in the State of Washington have all contributed to this decision.

Regards,

Scott Crownover
President & CEO
Skagit Horticulture LLC

A letter to customers dated February 7 gave only a bit more information:

To Our Customers,

Skagit Horticulture LLC will be discontinuing operations April 7th, 2024. This includes our Skagit Gardens and Northwest Horticulture brands. We have weathered many challenges in the past. However, current economic issues including market pressures, production cost, energy cost, freight cost and the business climate in the State of Washington have all contributed to this decision.

We plan to continue to have products available for sale through March 29th on a first come, first served basis while supplies last. Please continue to work with your account manager or you can place your order at www.skagitgardens.com. All sales will be final.

If you have other questions, please reach out to Katie Miller at your earliest convenience. She can be reached at the following: katiemiller@skagithort.com.

We have truly appreciated your support over the years and wish you and your business the very best going forward.

Sincerely,

Katie Miller
Retail Ready Sales Manager
Skagit Gardens

Scott's explanation for the closing—"... current economic issues including market pressures, production cost, energy cost, freight cost and the business climate in the State of Washington ..."—cover a lot of ground, basically everything every business faces, including yours (well, except the Washington part, although your state may not be a piece of cake, either). Business is tough these days, and if you don't have family involved, with a next generation that's hungry and ready for the battles ahead, well, sometimes closing is the wisest thing, especially if there's real

estate value involved.

Skagit Horticulture did start out as a family operation, Skagit Gardens, founded by Jim and Ruth Youngsman in 1966, growing Mother's Day mums in a single 20 ft. by 150 ft. greenhouse. They grew the business to more than 20 acres over the next 20 years. But it ceased being a family business in 1998, when the Youngsman's sold to International Garden Products—remember, that was back when many greenhouses and nurseries were looking very attractive to investors. However, IGP declared bankruptcy two years later and sold Skagit to venture capital firm Aequitas Capital Management. That didn't end well, with Skagit in debt and Aequitas being sued for fraud. Skagit had to file for bankruptcy in 2016, which was when Northwest Horticulture purchased them. And if you really want to go back into history, Northwest Horticulture was formed out of the old Summersun Nursery & Greenhouse owned by Carl Loeb, which eventually was renamed Etera—you may recall they were doing perennial liners grown in the ground with special bottomless pots? (Thanks to [Seattle Times](#) reporter Paul Roberts for helping refresh my memory on the history.)

Stepping into the vacuum

The loss of Skagit has hit the northwest horticulture community pretty hard, in large part because they have been an important young plant supplier to the region. I've heard from several of you up there saying as much.

Little Prince of Oregon's Mark Leichty sent a letter to customers stating that the staff is "shocked and saddened" to hear of the closing. Wrote Mark, "I've been in contact with management staff at Skagit over the past couple days to offer support during this difficult time and to inquire how Little Prince can be of assistance to them. I was impressed that their main concern was not for themselves, but for you, the Independent Garden Centers who are now wondering where you're going to get plants for the upcoming season."

Mark continued, "It is our intention to do everything we can at Little Prince to increase production to help fill the void left by the loss of Skagit Horticulture. I've also spoken with Ian Herrera at T & L Nursery so that our two companies can coordinate and support each other as we move forward. We've always valued the relationships we have with all the great wholesale nurseries in the Pacific Northwest. Together, we'll all do our part to mitigate the production gap, both now and in the future."

Got thoughts on the closing of Skagit? Weigh in [HERE](#).



Dissolved oxygen—all you need to know!

I've got one of my patented *GrowerTalks* free webinars next week, and the topic is going to be fascinating: **dissolved oxygen!**

Everybody is talking about the power of "D.O." as it's called for short—it enhances plant growth, reduces disease risk, even sanitizes your water, I think—and it's pretty simple and cost-effective to do, too. And as far as I know, most any grower can take advantage of it!

Our expert will be Les Evans, Design & Solutions Manager of DRAMMWater, Dramm's division devoted exclusively to irrigation systems. He's got more than 25 years experience in the field, so you know he knows his stuff. Les will discuss the benefits, the systems and the procedures for optimizing the dissolved oxygen in your irrigation water.

It's Wednesday, February 21 at 1 p.m. Eastern/Noon Central. Sign up at

www.growertalks.com/webinars.

Oh, this is Part 1 of a 2-part series! Part two will be on “Common Water Problems and How to Solve Them, featuring Damm’s Kurt Becker, another of Damm’s water experts. Check out the details and sign up for that one while you are at our webinar site.

See you there!



NGB, AAS to merge

Two industry non-profits are becoming one: National Garden Bureau (NGB) and All-America Selections (AAS) have completed an organizational merger of the two organizations into one. National Garden Bureau is now the parent organization, with AAS being the plant trialing program under National Garden Bureau. Why? Operational efficiencies and overhead cost savings, they say, along with reducing duplication of efforts, identifying more synergies, and creating more opportunities for leadership by professionals in our industry.

Previously, the “sister” organizations worked closely to vet and promote great growing material, support the green industry and connect with the gardening public. In fact, with my old boss Diane Blazek serving as executive director of both, it often felt like they were one organization, even though they weren't.

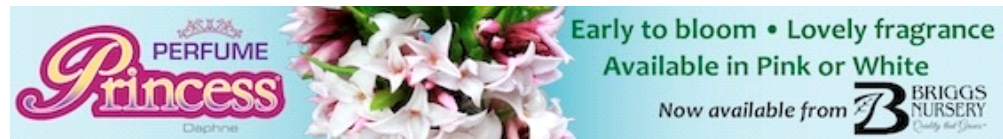


Externally, you won't see much of a change after the merger, as the two separate websites (aaswinners.com and ngb.org) will remain, with NGB doing even more promotion of the AAS Winners. All Committees that were part of the two organizations are now programs run by Vice President Board members.

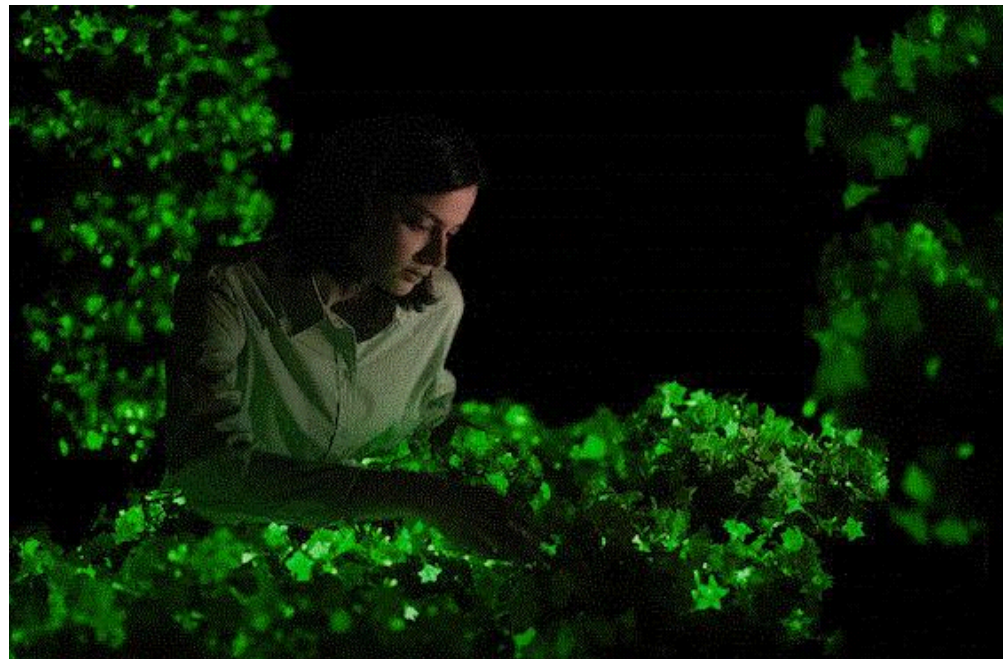
Besides Diane and her staff, here's who's running the show, aka, the new Board of Directors for National Garden Bureau:

- President: Alicain Carlson, Syngenta Flowers
- Past Presidents: Jeannine Bogard, Syngenta Vegetables & Scott Rusch, Express Seed
- Treasurer: Marissa Verdi, Harris Seeds
- Secretary: Pat Racey, National Garden Bureau
- AAS Trials Program VP: Chelsey Lenczyk, Bejo Seeds

- AAS Display Gardens Program VP: Penny Merritt-Price, Youngs Plant Farm
- AAS Combined Judges Program VP: Denise Mullins, Smith Gardens
- Non-Plant Promotions Program VP: Paula Douer, Crescent Garden
- Special Projects Program VP: Josh Kirschenbaum, PanAmerican Seed
- Surveys and Membership Program VP: Lisa Heredia, Danziger
- Year of the Program VP: Alec Charais, Bailey Nurseries
- AAS Winners and New Plant Promotions Program VPs: Joe Cimino, Sakata & Alisha Burns, Johnny's Seeds



You weigh in about Firefly petunia



Rarely do I receive as much feedback as I have regarding the glow-in-the-dark petunia, Firefly. I suspected you'd have opinions; actually, I thought more of them would be negative. I learned that glowing plant technology has been messed with since the 1980s (maybe earlier). And I was reminded of GloFish, the glowing aquarium fish (but these express fluorescent protein genes that glow under certain wavelengths of light including blue LEDs and blacklights).

Here's what you had to say:

"Thanks for the Firefly announcement. I just ordered one. It'll be a great gift for my old-time grower father."—*Jeffrey Meulenbroek, Studley Flower Gardens, Rochester, New Hampshire*

I can't wait to hear what dad has to say about it!—*Chris*

"I ordered a plant for April delivery. The shipping cost for the one plant is \$38.39, so the total invoice is \$67.39. It will be delivered in a 4-in. container and I will plant it in my summer container trial. I will post photos throughout the season on its development on Facebook and Instagram. I believe this is just the beginning of a series or stand-alone bioluminescent plants.

I am excited to see if this Firefly Petunia delivers as advertised!"—*Vaughn Fletcher, Fletcher Consulting, Liberty, Missouri*

(An update from Vaughn about his order: "I received an email from Light Bio informing me that the quoted freight charge was excessive and did I want partial credit or more petunias? I responded with more plants! The more the merrier!")

"Just because we can doesn't mean we should. Yuck!!"—*Beth Coombs, Down To Earth Distributors, Eugene, Oregon*

"I think this is scary (that we can insert DNA into a plant to make it glow in the dark), but cool (that it glows in the dark). At that price point, it will be a special, unique highlight in a garden. Just wondering how the insects, etc. will react to it."—*Joyce Block, Fort Worth Botanic Garden*

"I am not a huge fan of most things GMO (mainly when they use it for herbicide resistance on food crops), but this one I do like! I have been telling people for years someone should do that with trees and do away with street lights!"—*John Campbell, Delaney's Landscape Center Inc., Polson, Montana*

"I am excited. Seeing bioluminescence fungi was always a dream of mine. Having it in a petunia would be amazing. However, since our store is closed during the night, POP would need to be strong to offset the costs. I am sure they will be expensive. I look forward to finding some when they come to Canada."—*Pamela Pilling, Canadian Tire, North Kamloops, British Columbia, Canada*

"Very, very, cool, Chris. I can't wait to see this product first-hand."—*Jim Pugh, American Farms, Naples, Florida*

"Thank you for the great information on the Firefly petunia. I haven't taken the time to research it on my own, so I appreciate your update. I hate to admit that, unlike painted poinsettias and dyed roses, I could actually get behind this. It's been all over social media and local plant group pages throughout the past month. I know this is new to the market but I'm already wondering how an IGC will be able to grow and sell these types of plants. Is this something Light Bio is eventually sharing with plug producers so we can access it? Or is this strictly offered to consumers only? And, just out of curiosity, are any retailers considering buying 4-in. petunias at \$29 and then retailing them?!"—*Laura Kalfs, Landscape Garden Centers, Sioux Falls, South Dakota*

"While I personally think that glowing petunias are very cool, I can't help but wonder what impact the glowing will have on night flying insects, especially those that pollinate at night?"—*Margrit Nitz, Ball Horticultural Company, West Chicago, Illinois*

"I wonder what the hawkmoths that feed on the petunias at night will 'think' of this advance."—*Richard Criley, Professor Emeritus, University of Hawaii*

Finally, Ron Dieter, a retired garden center owner self-described as having too much time on his hands, offered the following:

Chris, I have some questions about Firefly petunias:

- Would lightning bugs get confused and be looking for love in all the wrong places?
- Can you get a shock while pruning these plants?
- Could they replace airport runway marker lights?
- How about inserting the genes into trees? The trees would shed light onto your solar panels and you'd have electricity day and night.
- Maybe insert the DNA into conifers to get Christmas trees with built-in lights?

Our hortistician defends the poinsettia

Recently, I ran a couple of letters from readers arguing that poinsettias are an unsustainable crop, using too many resources for too little return. Dr. Marvin Miller, our friendly neighborhood hortistician and long a fan of the pretty pulcherrima (don't miss his videos waxing poetic on [cyathium](#) and [involucre](#)s), comes to the crop's defense:

The recent feedback challenging the legitimacy of poinsettias bothers me, for if we decry the poinsettias as a legitimate floriculture crop, what would be next? Do we discard all our potted

flowering plants following the same arguments? Should we ban foliage plants, too? How about cut flowers, which don't last as long as poinsettias and which often fly great distances to make it to the consumer's shopping cart?

The truth is, our job as the horticulture industry is to produce what the consumer demands. Potted flowering plants, as a group, are our U.S. industry's second largest segment, based on sales dollars (behind bedding/garden plants). And poinsettias happen to be the top potted flowering plant grown and sold in terms of units, accounting for 21.5% of all pot plant units. And they happen to account for 19.2% of all pot plant dollars, trailing only potted orchids.



This doesn't mean we should overlook the environmental issues associated with our industry's products, but we should put it in context. Consumers certainly buy a lot of products that end up in landfills or junkyards or, if we're lucky, in compost piles decomposing into something that will serve a noble purpose going forward. The fact that our industry's plant products are all recyclable should have merit. They devolve into a much more noble end than say, automobiles. Driven by a junkyard lately?

And if someone wants to challenge the future of poinsettias, that's fine, but let's ask who has promoted their value in recent years? Paul Ecke, Jr. certainly was a poinsettia champion and did more to promote their value than anyone just by putting them on evening news sets, on The Tonight Show, and the like. As you noted early in the poinsettia season, there was hardly a mention of the crop's availability in the holiday advertising circulars this year. Granted, a lot of young people question the value of potted flowering plants in general, preferring foliage plants, especially succulents in recent years. And the fact that Americans are shying away from organized religion in greater numbers than ever before may be challenging the crop's importance for Christmas Eve services at many churches. But I dare say it is our job as horticulturists (as opposed to botanists, we are the people who make money with flowers and plants) to figure out how to add value to our crops, so that the consumer can appreciate the power that plants can bring to their lives. Perhaps, the time of the 6-in. single plant pinched poinsettia has peaked and even started to decline. But as we saw this fall, there are many other ways to sell poinsettias in combinations with other plants, in different more interesting containers, and I'm certain, in ways many folks have yet to consider.

Thanks, Marvin!

Got a comment about his comment? Comment [HERE](#).

Finally ...

Attention retailers (and fans of retail, which should include all growers): Consider attending the International Garden Center Congress (meaning tour) in Montreal and Quebec City, Canada, August 25-31. If it's anything like the eight IGCA Congresses Laurie and I have attended, it will be the trip of a lifetime! Ten different garden centers, plus gardens, waterfalls, Montreal Botanical Garden, the Biodome, a cannabis production facility (no samples, sorry), and even a cool-sounding retailer called Archipel, billed as "a deeply human adventure, born from the idea of offering a space and an innovative shopping experience rich in experiences to satisfy those passionate about well-being and living well."

Best of all, you'll travel with some of the most passionate and experienced retailers from around the world, developing friendships that will pay off big-time.

To learn more, visit <https://www.igca24.ca/>.



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Feel free to email me at beytes@growertalks.com if you have ideas, comments or questions.

See you next time!

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read 'Chris'.

Chris Beytes

Editor-in-Chief

GrowerTalks and Green Profit

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