

Caladiums: Bates closed; At the Festival; Lake Placid Then and Now



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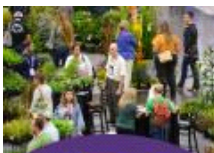
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## *GrowerTalks'* **Acres Online**

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### COMING UP THIS WEEK:

BrightFarms on cyclospora  
Bates family closes the business  
At my first caladium festival  
- A family history  
- Lake Placid then and now  
- The fields—still impressive!  
Voter Voices—contact DC!  
Costa and the Planta app  
Weed Management online



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### CEA lettuce, from BrightFarms' perspective

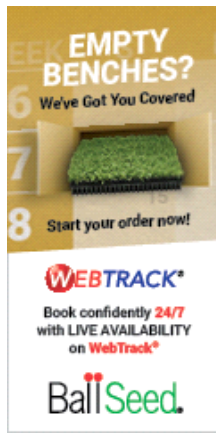
Last time, in covering the demise of 80 Acres Farms, I discussed the cyclospora outbreak and whether or not CEA growers were able to benefit from it—in other words, were customers gravitating towards hydroponic lettuce from the field-grown stuff in which the outbreak was found.

The answer seems to be “not yet” or “not significantly.” But consumers ARE expressing interest in CEA lettuce via websites and social media.

Greenhouse lettuce grower BrightFarms is one of the companies I'm most familiar with, so I reached out to them for their perspective on the topic. Here's what Brand Manager Kayla Michelson told me that confirms that:

“We don't have specific sales figures to share at this time (due to timing of Nielson data refresh, which has a significant lag), but what we can point to is a meaningful uptick in engagement across our website, store locator and social channels, which tells us shoppers are actively trying to understand where their food comes from and how it's grown since the cyclospora outbreak began.

“Since the week of July 13, when the cyclospora news began reaching mainstream media, we've seen a 111%-plus increase in website traffic YTD compared to the previous time period. We've also seen increased engagement and follower growth across our social channels, along with a significant bump in store locator visits beginning the same week.



"We are continuing to lean into greenhouse education for both retail buyers and consumers as this continues."

Smart, Kayla! Because while there may not be a sales bump this time around (consumers seems to be avoiding lettuce altogether for the time being), the awareness that there's an alternative could put more CEA products on store shelves—and with clearer labeling as to the source.

That's my biggest beef: So much lettuce is packaged similarly these days regardless of how it's farmed that consumers need to study the package details with a magnifier to see where and how it was produced. We (meaning produce department managers) should make it easy to distinguish!



## Bates daughters close the family business

I've got a big section coming up below on my recent trip to Lake Placid (Florida's) annual Caladium Festival, but first, a big piece of caladium industry news because I've finally been able to confirm straight from the source that one of the oldest and most venerable families in the caladium world has decided to retire and close the business.

Bates Sons & Daughters had been in business since the end of World War II, when Emmett and Mildred Bates planted a 5-gallon bucket of mixed caladiums in Lake Placid. Now, 80 years later, the third generation, sisters Terri and Sheri, have decided it's time to retire, in large part because the fourth generation isn't interested in carrying on the family tradition.

Explained Terri via email, "Sheri and I have no children that were interested in taking over the



business. They all live in cities across the Southeast and Lake Placid doesn't appeal to them.

"We did entertain a few offers [to buy the business], but nothing was a good fit."



The Bates family, circa 2004 when I visited: Dot, Heidi, Don, Sheri and Terri.



Terri and Sheri show off their (then) new prefinished business.

Terri said their seed stock and exclusive varieties were sold to three Lake Placid growers: Heartland Caladiums, Hendry Caladiums and Lake Country Farms. And the land is leased to a caladium farmer and a vegetable farmer.

They've also sold their caladium pre-finished business, Capital Caladiums Co.

Terri continued, "We are grateful that the businesses were financially successful and we can retire with ease. This is a great industry. I have made many friends and appreciate all my loyal customers over the years. I will miss them, but retirement is looking really good. It's time."

Congratulations to you and your sister, Terri! Your family has provided many tens of millions of colorful caladiums to the world and you will be missed!

For a blast from the past, [HERE](#) is a piece I wrote about Bates after a visit in 2004.



## At my first Caladium Festival

Luckily for me, the 35th Annual Caladium Festival in Lake Placid, Florida, was a week earlier than usual, meaning that for once it did NOT conflict with Ball Customer Days—meaning I could attend! Hurray!



I've enjoyed learning about Florida's unique and interesting caladium industry from Terri Bates (whom I was sorry not to see at the event) and Dr. Bob Hartman from Classic Caladiums, but I wanted to see caladiums as the public does—at the festival, immersed in the colorful foliage, riding a tour bus past the impressive fields and eating what my friend Jeff and I long ago dubbed "exotic airshow food" from trailers while listening to local musicians. Great fun!



There were two caladium sponsors of this year's event: Classic Caladiums (which isn't actually in Lake Placid, but is about 40 minutes north in Avon Park) and a new company to me, [Florida Boys Caladiums](#). Both had big tents overflowing with bags of bulbs to purchase (tubers, really, but let's not get technical) along with finished plants.





My good friend Nelson Darden, national sales manager for Abbot-IPCO and Classic Caladiums (and my personal Texas sausage supplier), was most hospitable at their tent, hooking us up with some of their latest caladium varieties. But I was also interested in learning more about Florida Boys, the only other caladium sponsor of the event. Luckily, the owner, Jason Holmes, was the guide on my tour bus, so I got to meet him. It was some of his fields we were driving past and he told the story of how he's both a third-generation and a first-generation caladium grower.



## A little caladium family history

Jason's grandparents, LL and Vivian "Boots" Holmes, began growing caladiums in the 1940s, starting with just a half bushel of "seed" (small bulbs for starting a crop). Early references say that LL and Boots had a cooperative arrangement with F.M. Joyner, a Tampa postman and amateur plant breeder who helped put caladiums on the map. If you've grown the variety "Postman Joyner" (right), you've grown a piece of history. Other notable families also getting into this new caladium business in the '40s included Bates, Hoffman and Hendry.



Twenty years later, the Holmes' Lake Huntley Bulb Farms was the world's largest caladium grower (according to a 1959 newspaper article), with more than 100 acres and upwards of 120 varieties. They ran that farm until 1966.



Jason and the family were swamped with customers and commitments during the event, but I got them to hold still long enough to snap this picture. This is Sandi and sons Lincoln (with hat) and Weston.



The fourth generation wanted me to make their hard-working, caladium-selling girlfriends famous, so here you go! That's Paizlee Carnahan with Weston and Lennox Ullrich with Lincoln.

In 1980, Jason's dad, Bill, resurrected the family caladium business after several years as a banker. He still runs Lake Huntley Bulb Farm today. When Jason's turn came in 1999, he too started planting his own fields with his wife, Sandi, and now his three sons. Today, Heartland Caladiums Inc. (DBA Florida Boys Caladiums and Caladium World), is about 65 acres and about as many varieties. What makes them unique is that nearly all of their sales are done online—Jason said he much prefers that to wholesaling.



## Lake Placid then and now

Is Lake Placid still the Caladium Capitol of the World? Yes, because nobody has yet found a spot on the globe that replicates Lake Placid's acidic, nutrient-rich muck soil, ample rainfall and long growing season. The caladium's native home is the Amazon basin and Lake Placid is basically a domesticated version of that. However, equally important is the 80-plus years of know-how accumulated by the family farms that call Lake Placid home.

But the numbers—in acreage and farms—have dropped drastically (and now by one more, as you saw in the Bates news).

Jason told me that when he started his farm in 1999, there were 22 caladium companies producing between 1,300 and 1,400 acres of tubers. Past surveys by the University of Florida have put that acreage as high as 1,500. Today, it's down to about 490 acres in Lake Placid, plus another 200 at Classic Caladiums in Zolfo Spring (about 30 minutes northwest)—making 700 acres or so total—less than half of Lake Placid at its peak.

As for farms, that number is down to six, operated by four families: Jason's company, Heartland; his dad's, Lake Huntley; Good Days Caladiums (owned by Jason's stepbrother, Brooke Chapman); Lake Country Farms (the Harrison family); Hendry Caladiums (the Hendry family, who also have a DBA called Caladiums Florida); and Classic Caladiums (owned by Abbott-IPCO). I should mention that, as I understand it, Good Days is 100% contract growing for Classic. (I've also heard that Craig Phypers of the family that owned Happiness Farms is doing about 5 acres of contract growing for Hendry.)

Another note about Classic: They're now doing caladium production in Mexico. They have about 125 acres they've been testing for two seasons. Abbott-IPCO President Art Goodwin told me they have lots of capacity there; they're in the process of evaluating how they'll move forward with it.

Beyond Classic in Mexico, if there are commercial caladium producers outside of Central Florida, I haven't heard about it, other than some small production in Taiwan (now shipping to the UK) and Thailand. But no other region appears to approach Florida in acreage, volume, variety or importance to the global supply chain.

(Note to Lake Placid growers: If any of this is inaccurate, please **CORRECT** me!)



## The caladium fields—still impressive!

As you drive out of town headed east on County Road 621, you pass signs pointing you to those businesses. There's Holmes Ave. ... there's Bates Sons & Daughters ... and then you pass Happiness Farms, which the Phypers family closed in 2024 after 60 years in business.

A bit further east and you hit the low-lying wetland marsh system that for millennia was the rainy season runoff area for the lake and today is the thousands of acres of 20-ft. deep muck in which all the caladium farmers grow their crops.



Currently only the fields on the south side of the highway are being used for caladiums; Jason told me in its heyday, both sides of the road would have been colorful with caladiums. Much of the land is now being used to grow sod and vegetables.



Still, seeing 500 acres of caladiums is impressive, whether from a bus or from the tailgate of my truck when I went back for another look. And knowing that I'm looking at more than half of the world's caladium supply for 2027 is a bit humbling!



## **Voter Voice: Contact Your Legislators**

AmericanHort currently has three "Voter Voice" campaigns underway and they need your help to make them a success. It means contacting your representative in Washington—but

AmericanHort makes it easy, with an address-based connection to your representative and a pre-crafted message highlighting specific legislation (which you can customize and just click send).

Our national association asks you to please take a few minutes to complete the campaigns. And share the links with your employees, colleagues, family members, friends, suppliers and customers because every voice helps strengthen their advocacy efforts.

[CLICK HERE](#) to access these three Voter Voice efforts:

#### **Ask Congress to Support H-2A Reform**

House Agriculture Committee Chairman G.T. Thompson (R-PA-15) introduced H.R. 9535, the Securing Agriculture's Workforce Act (SAWA), a bipartisan bill that would deliver meaningful, long-overdue reforms to the program that horticulture and specialty crop businesses rely on to meet their workforce needs. As this legislation moves through Congress, it's critical that our members make their voices heard. Send a message today.

#### **Bipartisan Farm Bill**

On April 30, the House passed a bipartisan Farm Bill with major wins for horticulture, including specialty crop research, stronger pest and disease programs, block grants, disaster aid for tree and nursery growers, and support for innovation. Contact your senators and urge them to advance and pass a bipartisan Farm Bill that supports horticulture.

#### **Aid Package for Specialty Crop Growers**

Congress is considering a \$15 billion aid package that could deliver crucial relief for specialty crop growers, including ornamental horticulture. Urge your Members of Congress to ensure specialty crops receive fair access to this assistance.

Your industry thanks you!



### **Costa partners with Planta plant care app**

There must be hundreds of plant care apps out there, but if there's one that really works well, I haven't heard of it. However, if a plant app is backed by Costa Farms, I'd say it's worth a look.

The Homestead, Florida, grower has teamed up with the app [Planta](#) to offer a free month of premium online plant care with every e-commerce plant order.

"The collaboration combines Costa horticultural expertise with Planta's advanced digital tools to help consumers care for their plants with greater confidence, accuracy and ease," stated the press release.

We know folks still love houseplants and sales remain strong. But, then again, so does anxiety about watering, light, pest issues, plant ID and so on. In fact, in a recent Costa Farms survey, 55% of houseplant buyers said they're anxious about plant care. The partnership with Planta addresses these needs by pairing Costa Farms' trusted varieties with Planta's personalized care

schedules, smart reminders, plant identification, light-meter technology and diagnostic support.

Customers just need to order a Costa plant online to be eligible for the free month of app usage. I suspect that Planta hopes that in that time they'll find enough value to subscribe.

Curious why Costa would get involved with an app company, I emailed Justin Hancock, their director of lots of things, including R&D, brand marketing and hort content. I figured this fell under his purview.

"We're always looking for ways to make our end consumer's plant journey easier and more successful—and most of that happens in their homes, after they've purchased," he told me. "While we have a full-time care team that's available to help via social media, email, telephone and even online chat on the website, we want our consumers to have options. And an app on our ever-present phones that has additional functionality where they can get help/answers/inspiration just makes all the sense in the world."

Justin described how Planta's plant care reminders work:

"You enter the type of plant you have and answer questions about its environment, and Planta's AI spits out a pretty darned good recommendation for when you should water, fertilize, etc. Being AI and connected, it adjusts for weather ... for example, we're under a heat advisory here in Miami and Planta sent me a notification to check on my plants since it's so hot out today."

He continued: "The Dr. Planta functionality where you can take a picture of your plant and it helps to diagnose an issue can be super helpful to new plant parents. The in-app light meter is also a great feature. And there's an online community, so if you want to show off your plants, get input from other folks just like you, etc., it's all right there. We see these as a way Costa Farms can help extend a network of support to plant parents."

The Planta app is available for iOS and Android on the App Store and Google Play.



## Another UF online course: Weed Management

Got weeds? Who doesn't! Sign up for the University of Florida Greenhouse Training Online course in Weed Management, which starts September 7. It's part of the award-winning Greenhouse Online Training program offered by the University of Florida IFAS Extension. This course will help you understand weed management strategies for nurseries and greenhouses, including weed identification, herbicides and non-chemical methods for effective control that apply to every area of the world.

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- Reduce hand weeding and herbicide costs
- Intermediate level (some experience and training, or entry level university). Designed for greenhouse and nursery employees in the US and internationally who are in production, technical or sales roles.
- Lectures and assignments in both English and Spanish.
- This course counts towards the [Plant Health Professional Program](#).










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The course will be taught by Dr. Chris Marble, Associate Professor of ornamental and landscape weed management in the Department of Horticultural Sciences at the University of Florida. He focuses on teaching horticulture professionals about the importance of identifying weed species before applying treatments. Growers in the course have described him as an instructor who is “very thorough, easy to follow and learn from” who presents “weed management in an in-depth, clear manner.”

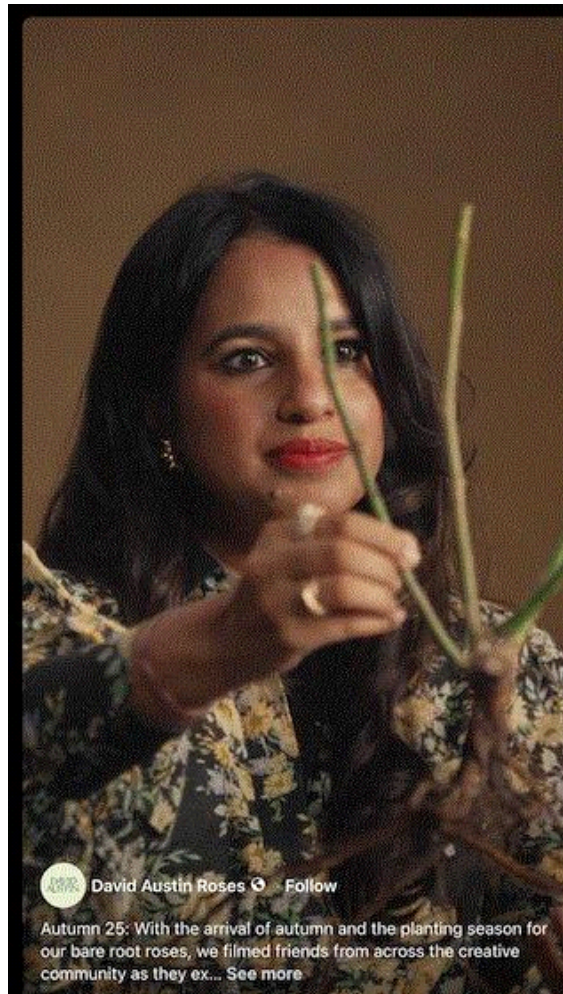
The course is part of the Plant Health Professional Certificate and is offered in English and Spanish and runs for four weeks from September 7 to October 2. The cost is \$293 per participant. All course material is completely online and available at any time of the day, and includes pre-recorded videos, quizzes and an interactive discussion board. Two new modules are activated each week during the course for a total of eight learning modules. Instruction is at your own pace and time within the four weeks of the course, with a typical time commitment of about five hours per week.

Pro tip: Sign up five or more of your staff (there are a lot of weeds out there) and get a 20% discount!

Click [HERE](#) to register. Go Gators!



**Finally I ...**



HERE is a “bizarrely sexy” take on using video to market plants by David Austin Roses.

The film’s website (yes, it’s shot on film, not video) says this about the project:

*Working closely with Lucy Irby’s PR team, the goal was to introduce David Austin Roses to a younger audience while reinforcing the brand’s heritage and craft.*

*We created a series of videos built around carefully selected influencers whose audiences aligned with the brand’s next generation of customers. Alongside this, we shot interviews using a two-camera setup with 16-mm Bolex inserts, adding texture, movement and a dynamic feel to a traditionally classic subject.*

I’m not saying it would work in America. In fact, I’m not sure any American influencer would have a clue what a bareroot rose is, like these folks seem to.

But it’s different!



**Finally II ...**



(From Emma Holmes' Instagram.)

Maybe it's the Lake Placid water. Or the muck soil. Regardless, something has these caladium people sticking together. I just learned that Jason and Sandi's Holmes' oldest son, Walker, is married to Emma Russell, who just happens to be the granddaughter of Dr. Bob Hartman of Classic Caladiums. They have one son, Wirth, and a daughter on the way.

You never know—this might just be yet another generation of future caladium growers!

*Heliopsis 'Forged in Fire'*  
New to Proven Winners  
Perennials for 2026-2027!



Feel free to email me at [beytes@growertalks.com](mailto:beytes@growertalks.com) if you have ideas, comments or questions.

See you next time!

*Chi*

Chris Beytes

Editor-in-Chief

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