

What's up in Apopka; Plus events, education & two scraps of history



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GrowerTalks' **Acres Online**

News and Commentary from GrowerTalks Magazine

COMING UP THIS WEEK:

Selecting media for better retail
Jane Stanley on my podcast
At the MREC Field Day
- Some cool pothos!
Battling the Dutch VAT increase
Mum Fest time in Barberton
Plant breeders to meet in Miami
Team burned out? Here's help!
Harrell's new greenhouse team

**NATIONAL
PLANTS OF
THE YEAR
BOOST SALES**

**ANNUAL
OF THE YEAR
2027**



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Surfinia



Livestream webinar on selecting media for better retailing

Can you have your cake and eat it, too? Meaning, can you select a potting mix for optimum production, but also give your retailer a helping hand with shelf life? Yes!

In **"Grower Panel: Growing Plants for Retail Success,"** we'll have a panel discussion to explore how today's substrate choices—including mixes incorporating wood fiber—can strengthen root development, improve moisture management and enhance overall plant resilience from propagation all the way through retail. You'll come away with real-world strategies for growing plants that hold their quality long after they leave the greenhouse.

It's slated for **Wednesday, September 30**, at 1:00 p.m. Eastern/Noon Central.

In this free livestream, I'll be introducing guest moderator Jack Bobo from peat and potting mix company Berger for a wide-ranging discussion with Andrew Butler of Green Valley Greenhouses in Ramsey, Minnesota, and Mike Busch of Meyers Farms in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario. They'll share practical insights drawn directly from their own production systems, highlighting what works, what doesn't and how these materials behave from propagation all the way through retail.





Sign up [HERE!](#)



Jane Stanley on the Chris Beytes Podcast

My newest podcast features Jane Stanley, our 2016 Young Grower Award winner. Jane is Manager, Technical Services—Greenhouse & Nursery for Atticus LLC, a distributor of branded-generic pest control products. But when she won, she was quality control manager and grower at Saunders Bros. in Virginia. Owner Sonya Westervelt, who nominated Jane for our award, wrote, “She simply rocks ... She is sharp as a tack, incredibly hard working and determined. All fantastic qualities in a grower!”



And like all the Young Grower Award winners I've interviewed for this podcast series, she's enthusiastic! In our chat, we cover how she discovered horticulture (she initially went to college to study art history or linguistic or something else in the humanities, but, thankfully, her parents are avid gardeners and that planted the seed and eventually environmental science called her name). Then we get into lessons she's learned in her career thus far, her proud moments, her biggest goofs, and how we find and encourage the next Jane Stanley. It's a fantastic story!

Listen/watch [HERE](#).

And find the full playlist of the Chris Beytes Podcast [HERE](#).



At the MREC Field Day in Apopka

On Wednesday, I slipped the surly bonds of my desk and flew up the turnpike northwest about 45 minutes to Apopka, still considered the Indoor Foliage Capital of the World, to attend the Mid-Florida Research & Education Center (MREC) Field Day, held to give stakeholders an up-close look at what the University of Florida professors and grad students are working on.

MREC has an interesting story: It's the combination of what were once three research stations—Naples (1929), Sanford (1933) and Apopka (1968). They joined all three together in 1986 and put them in this building in 1999. Lots of space (218 acres) and lots of greenhouses (130,000 sq. ft.—even if the greenhouse facilities reminded me a bit of my own from the 1980s). Still, they reflect what the typical Florida grower uses—which is not Venlo glass, it's fiberglass and double poly

Anyway, I met the former director, Dr. Kirsten Pelz-Stelinski, who recently transitioned to Associate Dean for Research; and the new (as of August 10) interim director, Dr. Mathews Paret, chair of UF's Department of Plant Pathology and a very nice fellow.

I asked Dr. Paret why hold the open house and he told me there's so much to talk about that the facilities researchers are working on, especially in the world of CEA (controlled environment agriculture) and the future of food production. But while I tend to think of CEA as \$50 million glass greenhouses to grow tomatoes and peppers and lettuce, he reminded me that it can be much simpler than that—like the thousands of acres of high tunnels and other simple structures covering Almeria, Spain—you know, the place that's so big you can see it from space?





For example, just being able to control the amount of water reaching a melon crop with a simple poly cover can greatly enhance the quality of the fruit. Florida has more than 150,000 acres of fresh market vegetables, all of which could potentially benefit from “CEA” in whatever form it takes, from simple tunnels to high-tech greenhouses.

At the other end of the CEA spectrum, MREC is working with NASA on growing food in space. Dr. Paret said he wants UF to become “the Silicon Valley of horticulture,” and with 12 Research and Education Centers across the state and 600 total hort and related faculty members, there’s no reason UF can’t do it!



In the greenhouses

Growing food is noble and essential and all that, but we were in Apopka, where ornamental plants still rule, so I grabbed up one of the UF grad students, Phoebe Austerman, who's working on her master's degree, to get a behind-the-scenes look at her own research, as well as that of her adviser, Dr. Jianjun Chen, famous for the pothos he's introduced to the marketplace, including the patented varieties Marble Prince, Neon Queen and Ivory Knight.



Dr. Chen was not onsite to show us his newest stuff, but the display he set up was impressive—take a look at the variety! From the strong white colors of 0325 to the rich green and gold of 0324 ... we saw a wide variety of variegation and leaf shapes. Truly, the pothos market will continue to be exciting in coming years. (Dr. Chen is also researching *Ficus lyrata*, the tropical tree Kratom and Yacon, a South American tuber that has potential as a Florida field crop.)

In a nearby greenhouse, Phoebe's research revolves around coleus, a crop made popular by UF's Dr. Dave Clark, who's introduced more than 125 varieties to the trade since the program started in 2003—varieties such as Trusty Rust, Wasabi, Campfire, Redhead and Mainstreet Beale Street, the first All-America Selections award-winning coleus (2020).

Coleus can be difficult to cross by hand and controlled pollinations often have a relatively low success rate. Because of that, all of Dr. Clark's new varieties have come from what breeders call "recurrent mass selection"—a technical way of saying, "put a large population of plants together and let the bees do the crosses." You harvest the seeds, grow them out and select the best seedlings.



Phoebe's research, under the supervision of Drs. Chen and Clark, is taking a different approach. Rather than relying primarily on seedling variation generated through pollination, she's exploring tissue-cultured populations as a source of novel variation and selecting promising variants with potential ornamental value.

At least that's what I was told—Phoebe couldn't say more than that, otherwise, she'd have to kill me, but it's refreshing to see a young horticulturist excited about her burgeoning career in our industry. (Also, Phoebe said she likes to write, so you might just see her byline in *GrowerTalks*!)



**SAVE 2-4 WEEKS
IN PRODUCTION**



Royal FloraHolland still battling the Dutch VAT increase

I wrote about this once before: The Dutch government is planning to increase the VAT (value added tax) on flowers, plants, trees and bulbs from its current 9% to 21%. Unfortunately, since I last reported on this the news isn't good: The Dutch cabinet formally included the increase in its 2027 Tax Plan, confirming what the industry had feared—that the plan was going forward in spite of protests. If approved in votes in November and December, it'll go into effect January 1, 2028 (not 2027 as originally proposed). The higher VAT would apply to cut flowers, plants, bulbs, bedding plants and perennials, trees, and nursery products, including those imported into the Netherlands. (Exports remain outside the increase.)

The government's calculation is that a 21% VAT will raise about 305 million euros per year. If the entire increase is passed through to consumers (that is, if none of it is absorbed by producers), the government estimates flowers and plants could become up to about 11% more expensive.

The industry, however, is not so optimistic. It commissioned a study that says the additional revenues would be no more than about 213 million euros due to decreases demand for plants. It also estimates lost sales of between 546 million and 627 million euros, again, due to reduced

demand.

Royal FloraHolland, the big Dutch auction, has published another letter protesting the proposed increase, making these arguments:

The floriculture sector is sounding the alarm as the government stands by its plan to increase VAT on flowers, plants, trees and bulbs from 9% to 21%. The measure will make greenery more expensive, harm businesses throughout the supply chain and run counter to ambitions for sustainability, greening, health and wellbeing. The sector is therefore urgently calling on coalition and opposition parties in the House of Representatives and the Senate to scrap the VAT increase.

"The government wants to promote greening and invest in a healthy living environment, yet it is actually making the very products that contribute to this more expensive. Flowers and plants are not a luxury. They bring people together, cool our cities and make the Netherlands a more livable place. That is why we are asking politicians: scrap this VAT increase," said Pieter Bootsma, CEO of Royal FloraHolland, on behalf of the collaborative organizations in the floriculture sector.

VAT increase runs counter to greening ambitions

Plants, trees, flowers and bulbs contribute to greenery in homes, gardens, neighborhoods and cities. In urban areas, greenery helps, amongst other things, to mitigate heat stress, absorb torrential rain and enhance biodiversity. Particularly at a time of heatwaves, droughts and flooding, it is counterproductive to make these products more expensive.

Revenue is significantly lower than forecast

The estimated tax revenue is based on the assumption that demand remains virtually unchanged. However, research by Wageningen University & Research (WUR) shows that higher consumer prices lead to lower demand for flowers and plants. As a result, according to the calculations, the treasury will not receive the budgeted 328 million euros, but at most approximately 213 million euros.

Economic damage affects the entire supply chain

Recent research by Decisio (2026) estimates that the VAT increase will lead to a drop in turnover of between 546 and 627 million euros in the direct floriculture chain. Of this, 318 to 391 million euros will be borne by the retail sector, whilst the wholesale sector is also being hit hard. Due to the knock-on effects on sectors including transport, packaging and business services, the total decline in turnover amounts to between 674 and 830 million euros.

According to the study, total added value will fall by between 265 and 326 million euros, and employment by between 2,280 and 2,820 FTEs. This job loss will also result in a shortfall in income tax revenue and higher expenditure on unemployment benefits. Furthermore, the scope for investment in sustainability will diminish and the international competitive position of the Dutch floriculture sector will come under pressure.

Experiences in Spain show that a VAT increase can have major consequences. Following a fall in turnover and a wave of bankruptcies amongst florists there, the reduced VAT rate was reintroduced. The floriculture sector wants to prevent the Netherlands from making the same mistake.

Call to politicians: Scrap the VAT increase

The floriculture sector is calling on the government, and the coalition and opposition parties in the House of Representatives and the Senate to scrap the proposed VAT increase. The measure will generate less revenue than budgeted, cause significant economic damage and hinder the greening of the Netherlands. Flowers, plants and trees bring people together, contribute to wellbeing and make our living environment greener, healthier and more livable. That is precisely why they must remain accessible and affordable.



Dutch VAT (continued)

Will the Dutch flower industry be heard? It seems doubtful; the 9% VAT rate has been a special exemption for horticulture products since 1975 that some in power are arguing no longer applies. The basic arc of the VAT from then to now goes like this:

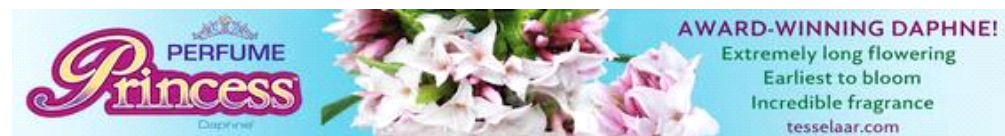
In 1975, the Dutch Parliament said that flowers and plants are too expensive, so let's make them more affordable and support horticultural employment by lowering the VAT from the standard 21% to the 9% rate reserved for a selection of goods and services like books, newspapers, magazines, the cinema, theater, zoos and so on.

In 2021, when Parliament asked why flowers and plants are still getting the 9% rate, the government said that the 1975 reason still applies.

But in 2023, another evaluation of the 9% rate concluded that higher-income households who purchase many of our flowers and plants capture much of the benefit, and that the reduced rate is an expensive way to support jobs in the flower and plant sector.

That's where Parliament is today with its decision to get rid of the special rate and go up to the 21% of most consumer goods.

It's hard enough to make money in this business without government stepping in and adding to the burden, eh?



Mum Fest time in Barberton

Yoder Brothers and their famous garden mums may be a distant memory for most of us (although the varieties are still alive and well in Syngenta's catalog), but mention "Barberton, Ohio" and that's who I think of. And every fall the town continues to celebrate the business Menno and Ira Yoder established once they found out that flowers pay better than vegetables.



The [36th Annual Barberton Mum Festival](#) will be September 26 and 27 at Lake Anna Park with the theme "Mums in Bloom for the Red, White & Blue!" As always, you'll enjoy a weekend packed with some 15,000 vibrant mums, tasty food vendors, unique craft artisans, family activities and live entertainment. Hours are 10:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. each day and admission is free!

A little research reveals that the Barberton Mum Festival got its start in 1991 when 15,000 chrysanthemum cuttings were donated by Yoder Brothers and planted along the eastern side of Lake Anna Park in anticipation of Barberton's centennial celebration.

My friend Bob Humm, a long-time Yoder sales rep (and my rep when I was a weekly potted mum grower in Florida in the '80s), posted some photos to his Facebook page. No aerial views yet (Bob, you need a drone!), but you can tell it's going to have a serious flag motif. Here, Bob says there are 50 white mum stars on a background of blue asters.



By the way, did you know that the Yoder brothers got their start in 1911 working for O.C. (Ohio Columbus) Barber at his Anna Dean Farm, a 3,500-acre experimental farm and agricultural showplace he'd created? O.C. was the Diamond Match King and chairman of the Goodrich Tire & Rubber Company and also the founder of the town of Barberton. When he died in 1920, Menno and Ira purchased his greenhouse operation and established Yoder Brothers Hot House Vegetable Company.

I learned all this and much more when writing [THIS STORY](#) about Aris Horticulture.



Independent Plant Breeders Conference set for Nov. in Miami

Now THIS is an event I'd love to attend! (alas, a personal scheduling conflict prevents it). The [Independent Plant Breeders Conference](#), held roughly every other year since 2004, is the one place where plant breeders of all stripes can come together to talk about their craft.

This 11th version of the event, slated for November 16-18, will be in the perfect setting to talk plant breeding: Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden on Old Cutler Road in Coral Gables.

If you're a plant breeder, whether independent or working for a global plant brand, you know that this conference is THE place to be for the information and networking you need to bring your products to market.

In the two-and-a-half-day conference, you'll get to tour Silver Vase Orchids, UF's research station in Homestead and Costa Farms (where you'll have lunch); do a reception and dinner at Fairchild, hear great speakers and even have some time on your own to explore the gardens or Miami.

Grad students: Travel grants are available! Just remit the IPBC Student Travel Grant Application to Dr. Lisa Alexander by October 1.

Sponsorship opportunities are available, as well!

Find everything you need [HERE](#).

Oh, and for fun, [HERE](#) is the Perennial Cynic's (John Friel) take in *Green Profit* on the 4th IPBC held in his backyard in 2010.



Is your team burned out? Here's help!

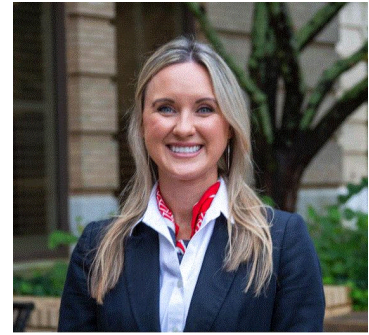
AmericanHort does more than just host Cultivate and lobby up in D.C. They also bring the help close to home, this time with a one-hour "Grow Forward" webinar titled "[Prevent Burnout with Working Genius](#)."

It's slated for Thursday, October 22, at 12:30 Eastern.

You and your team ever experience this: Some tasks feel effortless, while others drain you, and your great ideas stall somewhere between conception and completion? It's more common than you think.

The "Working Genius" model gives teams a shared language for understanding why that happens and a practical way to work better together to bring those ideas to fruition.

Your expert on the topic will be Dr. Lauren Griffeth, a Certified Working Genius Facilitator and Extension Leadership Specialist at the University of Georgia. Dr. Griffeth will teach you:



The Three Stages of Work: How every project or initiative moves through Ideation, Activation and Implementation, and why teams stall when a stage is under-resourced or rushed.

An Overview of Working Genius: The six types of genius (Wonder, Invention, Discernment, Galvanizing, Enablement and Tenacity), what energizes vs. drains each of us, and how to spot genius, competency and frustration in ourselves and colleagues.

The Altitude of Work: How the model applies at three different levels—organizational strategy, team projects and individual meetings so participants can use it beyond a single team, in whatever role they hold.

The webinar is included with your AmericanHort membership and \$49 for non-members.

Learn more and register [HERE](#).



New Project? Build it Efficiently.
Heating systems engineered for performance from day one.
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Harrell's now serves greenhouses, too, not just nurseries

Harrell's, a provider of fertilizer, plant protection products and business solutions for the green industry, is adding a new Greenhouse Division to its business, expanding upon the foundation of its Nursery Division, which has been serving the nursery and horticulture industries for more than 40 years.

"We see a need in the greenhouse market for a dedicated sales team that can serve greenhouse growers with the same level of focus and expertise that Harrell's has provided to the nursery industry for decades," said Scott Martiniere, Harrell's VP of Sales. "Our goal is to deliver value, technical expertise and outstanding service while strengthening the partnerships we have with our customers and vendor partners."

Founded in 1941 and headquartered in Lakeland, Florida, Harrell's has 32 warehouse locations in 22 states and reps covering all 50 states. They're a 100% employee-owned company.



As part of this expansion, Harrell's is pleased to welcome Todd Regenscheid, Greg Stone, Jim Brouwer, Lance Himmelwright, Broch Martindale, Bill Hupp, Julie Andre and Tim Andrews to the team. Their extensive industry experience and commitment to customer success will strengthen Harrell's ability to serve greenhouse growers and further establish the company as a trusted partner throughout the horticulture market.



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Finally ...



I've been putting the finishing touches on my Florida office, displaying and hanging various memorabilia and art collected over my 33-year career with *GrowerTalks*, along with older, more personal items, such as the sign from my mom's art gallery in Tequesta, Florida, and an original brass fruit box stencil from Laurie's great-grandfather's orange groves: "Fancy Indian River Oranges from R.S.S. Grant, Indianola, Florida." It dates back to the first part of the 20th century.

But two of my prized possessions are scraps of wood that anyone else would have tossed in the trash. One is a 4.5-in. by 10.5-in. white-painted rectangle signed by Paul Ecke III. It's a piece of the 1960s-era greenhouses of the Ecke Ranch in Encinitas, California. I was visiting with Paul and saw the greenhouse coming down and thought quickly enough to grab a piece of one.

The other scrap of wood is faded lavender, about 6 in. x 18 in., signed by Anna Ball. It's an original piece of fence that surrounded the Ball trial grounds from 1990 until the garden was redesigned for the company's centennial in 2005. It's lavender because famed East Coast landscape designer Guy Rando—hired by Anna's dad, Carl, to refresh the gardens—felt it should be.

The color choice is not really surprising, however. In the Ball centennial history book, "All the Best and Nothing Else," Anna recalled, "I remember the first time Guy came to visit he was wearing purple leather pants—quite a shock to our conservative Midwestern culture!"



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 that reads "Chi".

Chris Beytes
Editor-in-Chief
GrowerTalks & Green Profit

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