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Trending Topics

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We've all survived another Cultivate—late nights, early mornings and too much information for one brain to comprehend.

Someone once described it as entering a tunnel on Saturday and getting spit out the other side back into the real world four days later. An appropriate description.

If someone would ask me what was trending based on the show, I'd tell them two things: retirement and a disconnect in the houseplant market. First, let's talk retirement, as in, who isn't retiring? Over the last eight months we've seen story after story of retail owners (and sometimes growers, too) selling their property and hanging up the proverbial "Closed" sign for good. It's bittersweet because we all want retailers to sail off into the blue waters of retirement without a care, but we're sad to see another garden center close. Ellen wrote a wonderful testament in her column this month on page 43. To

counter that point, there are a few younger people picking up the mantle as others retire, like Elizabeth Elliott, who took over Himmel's Landscape & Garden Center in Pasadena, Maryland. Freelancer Ronda Payne tells that story.

As for the latter trend—a disconnect in the houseplant market—it was apparent from two Cultivate seminars I attended. One featured young, fresh-faced "influencers" talking very specifically about the houseplants they want, in Latin, no less (oh, and I learned in the houseplant department you should talk Latin to customers. Elsewhere, maybe not so much). These are rare and unusual plants; in fact, the rarer and more unusual the better. The next day in another session, sales reps for houseplant starts and growers lamented about the difficulties of getting in-demand plants to the U.S.

From U.S. suppliers that went bankrupt in Central America during the recession to challenges in predicting what's going to be popular (and combatting what one grower called "ridiculous" USDA importation standards), the barriers to achieving mass houseplant stock mounted quickly. "The growers there don't know what the customers want," one sales rep told the crowd. "If you don't tell the growers what you want, it'll be dictated by what they grow."

But, but ... that's not what customers want. They want what they saw in their Instagram feed, #urbanjungle, #plantsmakepeoplehappy, #houseplantclub. So how do we make better connections between the two and facilitate getting the trendier varieties to market faster? Or do we play off the uniqueness of varieties that can be secured (because it sounds like retailers rejoice whenever they can get their hands on a few unusual varieties) and charge accordingly? As Leslie Halleck, certified horticulturist, consultant and moderator of the influencers panel so smartly

noted: “Why can’t we have a luxury brand? Why can’t it be pricy and hard to find? Why can’t it be worth the price tag?”

Fortunately for me, I’m only paid to point out the problems and not solve them. But I think if we as an industry could somehow work through this availability issue, it’ll open up a wider lane of traffic for houseplant sales, which show no signs of slowing down anytime soon.

On another note, one operation that continues to stay in-step with the trends of the day is Boulevard Flower Gardens, the operation co-owned by this year’s *Green Profit*/RBI Young Retailer Award Winner Madison Williams. You can read how her and her sister and co-owner Casey Landa right-sized the operation for greater profitability and future stability.

This issue is also all about ideas, too, and we have plenty for you from Jen Zurko’s trip to Seattle and Ellen Wells’ trip to Nashville on the GCA Summer Tour.

If you have some thoughts about the houseplant conundrum, shoot me an email at jpolanz@ballpublishing.com. **GP**