

Looking Ahead to 2030

"To understand the next 20 years, we have to look back at the last 20 to 30 years and the evolution of our industry. The 1980s, decade of low-cost production (tables, transplanters); 1990s, decade of breeders (Wave petunias, Proven Winners); 2000s, decade of marketing/packaging (new pot colors, styles, import plastics); and 2010s, decade of logistics (trucking, turns, RFID, ERP systems, cross-docking). We are now entering a phase of cost control, inventory management and industry maturity. Once we manage that phase of the cycle, we will get focused again on growth and expansion.

"Without the investment in the logistics of the business, we will not have the cash flow to reinvest in growth driven by new ideas... but I really feel good that we will find this next spurt of growth in the 2020s."

— Abe Van Wingerden, Metrolina Greenhouses

Our industry has seen a lot of change and evolution in the past 20 years, from advancements in automation and organic/sustainable production to breeding breakthrough and innovative marketing efforts. But what do the next 20 years hold? We asked some industry experts to share with us their predictions for the decades ahead. Here's what they had to say.

"I believe that technology will be so deeply ingrained into breeding that the combination will allow us to schedule plants to be ready on a specific day of the week!

"Consumers will be far more sophisticated thanks to the ease of access to information. Plants will be more integrated into daily life — maybe we will be like Western Europe is today in consumption.

"Customers will be even more demanding to a more demanding end consumer. Ready dates will be much more specific, and packaging for all nursery products will need to be crisp and clean."

— Brian Sullivan, Ivy Acres

"By 2030, our industry will have fewer firms; most will be either very large (more than \$100 million in annual sales) or small (less than \$500,000 in annual sales). The larger firms will come from consolidation, but the need for the 'craftmanship' that smaller firms provide will persist.

"Growing food will have connected our dynamic industry to Gen X and Y, and their children will grow up as gardeners who know how to make a tomato or petunia grow.

"Friends will share gardens, meals and success in the garden... More people will do business with people they know."

— Bridget Behe, Michigan State University

"We are headed down the electronic highway at full tilt. Diagnostics will all be remote via handheld cameras and immediately uploaded to tools on the web that will identify the problem, check previous successful control strategies and determine what to do and real costs in real time.

"New plants will be thoroughly understood with respect to all characteristics — even pest and disease sensitivity. Controlling plant pests will be more specific and less toxic overall.

"It will also be easy to diagnose problems using very specific, inexpensive diagnostic tools based on molecular methods we are already using."

— Ann Chase, Chase Horticultural Research Inc.

"We will do less gardening and more decorating. That is really not any different than it always has been; we have simply come to the realization in the last five years that our plants have always been used to decorate, not to admire.

"New crops will be cyclical. Breeding of new crops is a necessity, and this will never go away. However, as the importance of marketing to the decorators increases, mainstreaming of new plants will be more difficult.

"If we don't cooperate with each other and market ourselves as an industry, we are doomed to be mediocre and redundant. Our messages of therapy, greenness, creativity and beauty are only as useful as the effort we put into delivering them. In 20 years, the industry will be a mainstream necessity or nothing more than a boutique niche."

— Allan Armitage, University of Georgia

"The number of vendors supplying the box stores will be winnowed down as retail warfare continues. This will lead to more production contracting and other strategic alliances as exclusivity becomes a requisite for vendor approval.

"We'll continue to refine our industry's value proposition, but it will most likely center on how our products enhance our end consumers' quality of life.

"Ethnicity will become a larger part of our discussions regarding end consumers' tastes and preferences. Color preferences are a major influence on our industry, and these may change as demographic shifts continue in our country as we move closer to 2030."

— Charlie Hall, Texas A&M University

"We will have to work harder to keep our products relevant. The selling channels will be dominated by the box stores. There will be fewer independent garden centers, replaced with grower-retailers. These will be more 'lifestyle centers' where consumers could purchase plants, go to a restaurant, get consultations or, who knows, even financial help.

"Our industry will have to work harder to educate the next group of consumers in the school systems because most city budgets will no longer have the funds to include any gardening programs."

— Danny Takao, Takao Nursery

"When it comes to production, the growers will continue to migrate away from oil and natural gas and to alternative energy sources to a point where biomass or anaerobic digesters will become the main heating systems for greenhouse operations.

"Automation will finally come to the packaging and shipping side of the grower operations. With consumer awareness being almost instantaneous and information available at their fingertips, continuous updates to how the plants look at retail will drive the need to reduce the labor involved in packaging in order to keep costs down."

— Dean Chaloupka, Visions Group

"One real unknown is where our industry sits in terms of future energy use and whether consumers will deem our products as a needed commodity. I predict that we will still be growing plants!

"My guess is that we won't be growing combination hangers unless the fad goes away and comes back again. An exciting aspect of ornamental horticulture is that products have a way of being recycled over the years in one form or another. What the heck: Just recently, consumers decided that Rex begonias and succulents are the coolest plants going, as if these plants had just been discovered. Maybe consumers will find another new plant in 20 years. I think they will call it marigold."

— Doug Cole, D.S. Cole Growers



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“Here are some of my thoughts based on current trends and what has been happening in horticulture in other parts of the world: Continued consolidation in industry (fewer but larger greenhouse operations); reduced university extension and research in greenhouse production (both will be more privatized in 2030); improvements in growing efficiencies (more mechanization, more energy-efficient structures and technologies); more contract growing with segmentation of crops (each contract grower focusing on only a handful of crops to optimize culture and environmental conditions); and LEDs will be commonplace for greenhouse lighting applications.”

— Erik Runkle, Michigan State University

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“In the past, the university — through state funding — provided money for researchers to hire students and technicians to complete projects. Now, nearly all research funding needs to come from sources outside the university. Currently, the number of universities doing significant research is down to about a dozen.

“What do the next 20 years hold? I see nothing but continual decline of academic floriculture research in the future. This decline will occur through attrition rather than by the dramatic cuts that have occurred in other countries. As faculty retire, strong arguments will need to be made to replace them.”

— Jim Faust, Clemson University

“Cost cutting, consolidation and contract growing will continue as many businesses position themselves for long-term survival.

“Growers must be aware of consumer trends as they evolve and position themselves to meet the needs of the market on an ongoing basis. Although the future seems unpredictable at times, always look forward, take one day at a time and don’t forget to enjoy what you do and live for the moment.”

— Paul Pilon, Perennial Solutions Consulting



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Write in 107

“Even though large mass marketers are selling a high percentage of floriculture crops, direct retail will become increasingly important. Farmers markets have been set up all across the country and are home to one or more vendors of cut flowers, bedding plants, perennials and potted flowering plants.

“The cost of oil will continue to fluctuate but will go up overall. This will put increasing pressure on businesses of all sizes to maximize greenhouse space usage, reduce production temperatures, improve structural heat retention or cooling, and reduce shipping distances.

“Will cut flowers and unrooted cuttings continue to be grown in large amounts offshore? Probably yes. Certainly, the relatively low cost of energy has supported the development of offshore production, but other factors are likely more important, such as labor costs and environmental conditions.”

— John Dole, North Carolina State University

“The next 20 years will see further consolidation and mechanization to reduce labor and improve quality on the growing side. Big will get bigger, middle will go away and efficient small growers will find niches. The suburbs will be where low-income people live and urban areas will become more densely populated and increasingly upscale. As a result, huge home improvement centers and box stores in suburbs will close, and small 7 Eleven-style urban garden centers will take their place.”

— Marc Clark, Rocket Farms

“Sustainable, affordable bio-containers will eliminate the plastic from retail-ready nursery containers. New technologies in watering and fertilizing will produce better crops while eliminating waste and runoff. Organic-certified disease and insect controls will be perfected to replace the chemicals we use today. Breeding will eliminate the need for PGRs.

“Distribution and replenishment software and IT will become the most critical bottom-line components for the greenhouse operation.

“Consumers will be more informed about their plants than ever before as they share and learn from their friends in the social network on the Web. Consumers will scan the products in the garden center and make purchase decisions based on a source they trust in their social network.”

— Rick Brown, Riverview Flower Farm

“Many of today’s species will be joined by others, which will complement the offering for those more interested in native or woodland plants.

“Between today and two decades from now, the retail environment will be challenged, no matter the industry. Generation X is much smaller than either the baby boomers or generation Y. For much of consumption, which is tied to demographic patterns, there will be fewer consumers looking for certain products; this is likely to challenge the tree and shrub producers and marketers greatly.

“The key to success in these intervening years will be to encourage Baby Boomers to continue gardening, as well as getting the potential customers from generations X and Y to get more involved with our products at an earlier time.”

— Marvin Miller, Ball Horticultural Co.

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