

SUSTAINABLE

VS.

HOW CAN YOU SUSTAIN SUCCESS WITH SUSTAINABILITY?

By Joli A. Hohenstein

Is sustainability sustainable? Most people are accustomed to forking over extra cash for a product that's organic, recycled or otherwise eco-friendly. But McConkey Co. in Sumner, Wash., hopes to challenge the assumption that sustainable products have to be more expensive.

With major retailers instituting sustainability initiatives like Wal-Mart's packaging scorecard and sustainable product index, environmental friendliness continues to take on new emphasis. As important as on-package environmental claims may be, it's just as important for consumers to believe the statements — and for them to be readily substantiated.

For many reasons, existing sustainable packaging hasn't always resonated with consumers, which makes it difficult for growers to justify costs. Often products are touted for their sustainability, biodegradability, compostability or recyclability, but the reality is just as often it takes commercial-grade recycling and composting facilities to make it happen.

Challenges like those have kept adoption rates low and led growers to steer away from sustainable options, even as consumer demand rises.

New technology creates new, truly recyclable, cost-neutral options, but how do you know? What's sustainable? What's recyclable? What's what?

Recycling Reality

Technically, "recyclable" means the reuse, reconditioning, and remanufacturing of products or parts into another product, according to the Federal Trade Commission — basically, things

that can be remade into other things. But the reality is that the current recycling infrastructure can only support so many products.

McConkey Co. has been working to develop rEarth, a line of 100 percent recycled plant containers made from used water bottles (rPET). If you are like 54 percent of Americans, you drink bottled water regularly.

Once empty, most water bottles get thrown away — even though their plastic (#1 PET) is one of the easiest for recyclers to process. An estimated 60 million water bottles enter U.S.

landfills each day and will remain there, intact, for hundreds of years.

If recycled, a water bottle can be remade into a variety of products, including clothing, reusable shopping bags, rugs, sleeping bags and now, flower pots.

"We're seeing fast adoption to rEarth due to advances in strength and thermo stability from technical advances in the bottling industry," says Jeff Gross, McConkey's director of business development.

As an added bonus for the end consumer,



It takes about one 16.9-ounce water bottle to make one rEarth 4.3-inch round pot.

RECYCLABLE

rEarth can be recycled curbside in many cities and counties. Since rEarth is made from the same plastic as water bottles, it is easy for a recycler to process.

This provides great opportunities for both growers and retailers to meet customer and end consumer demands for more environmentally friendly packaging within current processes and protocols.

Growers like Brian Hjelmstad of SummerWinds Nursery, with retail locations in California, Arizona and Missouri, like being able to offer a green option at no added cost.

“Providing our customers with a recycled, recyclable plastic grow container is just another part of SummerWinds’ efforts in being a green certified business,” Hjelmstad says.

Sustainability Success

Sustainability sounds simple, and it’s a great buzzword. But not surprisingly, there is much more to achieving sustainability than just making products environmentally friendly.

Sustainable manufacturing means the creation of manufactured products that use processes that minimize negative environmental impacts; conserve energy and natural resources; are safe for employees, communities, and consumers; and are economically sound, according to the U.S. Department of Commerce’s Sustainable Manufacturing Initiative.

While many people have come to expect that eco-friendly products are not always economic, some companies, like McConkey, are looking to debunk



Top: More than 2.2 billion water bottles are thrown away each year, and one water bottle can take up to 1,000 years to break down in a land fill.

Bottom: The rEarth process uses 60 percent less energy than producing containers from virgin plastics.

that idea.

Their rEarth container line costs the same as or less than traditional plastic pots. This is both due to freight savings by manufacturing in the United States, and the lower material cost of using post-

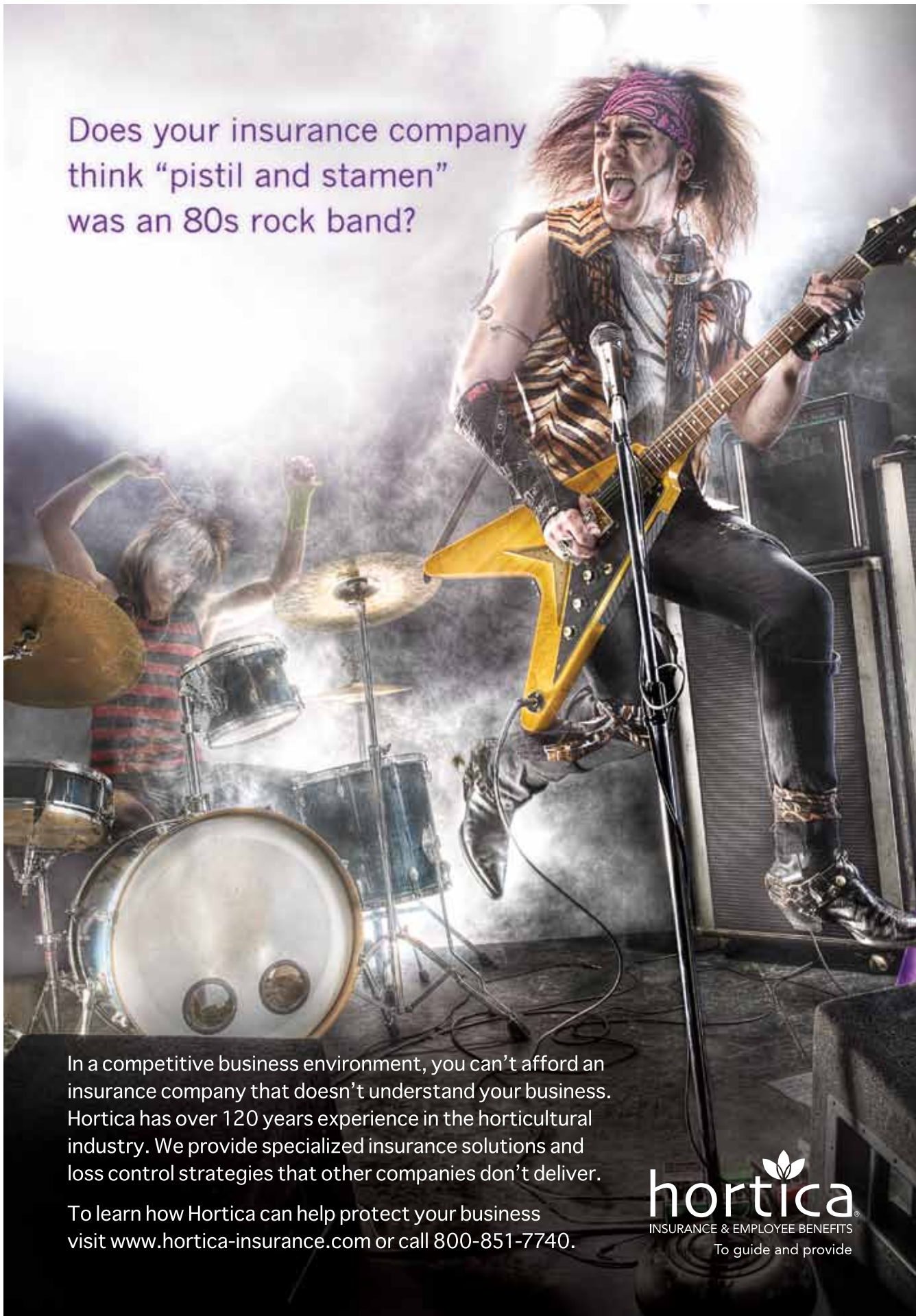
consumer recycled plastic.

The company also keeps down costs by manufacturing in California, a state with a well-organized recycling program and a highly successful bottle bill.



Every rEarth container bears the Recycled Water Bottles stamp so consumers know the container is not just recycled but also recyclable.

Does your insurance company think “pistol and stamen” was an 80s rock band?



As important as on-package environmental claims may be, it is just as important for consumers to believe the statements.

For both growers and end consumers, rEarth represents a major step forward in sustainability. And growers like the idea of adopting another eco-friendly practice without negatively impacting their bottom line.

Dudley Davis from California’s Do Right’s Plant Growers agrees. “We are very concerned about the environment and we try to make a positive difference; but in this economy, we need to worry about every cent. We like having a container option that is both good for the environment and cost-neutral.”

Sustainability can be sustainable! In some cases it starts with the simple act of recycling a water bottle. ☑

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