

# Giving Back for the Future

**When I travel to see customers** around my territory year after year, I often wonder who will take over for the owners when they are ready to retire. Do they have someone in mind to take over or will it just close and be just a memory?

I have gained the courage to ask some of these customers this question and their responses are mixed. A few of them say, “We are working on a plan,” and others say, “I haven’t thought about it and don’t have time to.” The funniest response yet has been, “Why, do you want to buy it? I will sell it to you for a good price.”

In all seriousness, what is going to happen in our industry if we don’t have people willing to learn and follow in our footsteps? This is a scary topic to think about.

## EARLY INSPIRATION

I have literally grown up in this industry and have been privileged to share my growing practices and knowledge with thousands of people over the last 30+ years in the gardening industry, but the best ones to work with have always been the kids — the excitement and joy on their faces when they are getting at least their hands dirty (some of them go a little overboard kind of like a baby with a first birthday cake).

One day a couple years ago, I was sitting on the couch at home when I saw a Facebook post on a Make-A-Wish story involving a child named Jason and the great people at Metrolina Greenhouses, which was shared by a friend who is also an employee. This began to put thoughts in my head about how I could help the children of the community where I live to be stewards of the environment and help them learn how to grow plants.

## FROM PTO TO GARDEN CLUB

My family and I moved to our new house in South Carolina just south of Charlotte, North Carolina, over four years ago. The schools welcomed us with open arms and let us get involved as much as we wanted. We started small by joining the PTO but quickly grew from there.

When I first got started helping with the garden clubs, it was at the middle school where my son Sam attended. I did not know how the students at middle school would react to getting dirty and working as a team weeding the vegetable beds before planting them.

To my surprise they all got in there and did their part together. Then I demonstrated how to plant certain vegetables, from tomatoes and peppers to potatoes. The numbers of

individuals involved grew from meeting to meeting and then my two younger children started to help as well. Some of my local customers even donated plants and some soil to help fill flower pots around the campus.

This last year, I have been able to help start a new garden club for the elementary school (grades 3 through 5) and continue to help with the middle school. I enjoy watching these kids put down their cell phones and other electronic devices and get their hands dirty.

What is going to happen in our industry if we don't have people willing to learn and follow in our footsteps?

The garden club was so popular for the elementary school that it filled up the first day and had a waiting list. Also, the first graders at our school received a grant for eight raised beds and soil from the Soil and Water Conservation Agency. The students learn, plant and watch their vegetables grow in the spring and fall. They then harvest the vegetables when the plants are ready and make themselves a salad. I want to keep the trend growing and this year I plan to talk to the new school superintendent about doing a garden club at all of the elementary and middle schools.

## BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

As the school year ended and summer began, I often wondered if the students involved in the garden club would continue to garden over the summer. Some of them started their own vegetable gardens at their homes and enjoyed fresh vegetables all summer long. Hopefully the gardening bug does not wear off on these wonderful youths as they advance into high school and college.

Let’s all get involved with our local schools if you have not already. The level of involvement can be hands-on to just donating supplies or even setting up fundraisers for your local school’s garden clubs, FFA or 4-H. Lets make the future bright and full like a flower bed of \_\_\_\_\_ (insert your favorite plant here). [gpn](#)



*Matt Willoughby is a sales representative with Henry F. Michell Co. and a member of GPN's 40 Under 40 Class of 2015. He can be reached at [mwilloughby@michells.com](mailto:mwilloughby@michells.com).*