

Advancing an Industry: Grower Association, University and Government Interdependence



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Our guest today is Justin Marotta, greenhouse grower and floriculture industry leader. Justin earned his bachelor's degree in business management and finance at Ashland University. He started his career as a personnel director at F&R Lazarus and later became co-owner of Possum Run Greenhouse with his wife Lynn. He retired recently after 41 years having served as vice president, president and past president of OFA, now AmericanHort. He currently serves on boards at Kingwood Center Gardens, a community bank and his church as council president. Working within the city of Mansfield, Ohio, Justin also oversees the floral plantings working with volunteers.

Peter: Thanks for joining me today, Justin. Let's start with how you got into the greenhouse business and how you and your wife Lynn grew Possum Run Greenhouse into a nationally recognized operation.

Justin: Becoming a grower was purely an urge I had while also understanding the fortitude necessary for success. It was something I knew from hands-on experience having grown up in the greenhouse industry observing how my father and mother enjoyed the family benefits of greenhouse life. So, on a whim

and a prayer, the tears that my mother shed, and the confidence my father conveyed, off we went. We purchased an old greenhouse range (the weeds were as tall as me) complete with dilapidated greenhouses falling down around us. Thinking back on the naivete that a 24-year-old brought to this rural property with the goal of turning it into a destination brings back many fond memories.

Lynn continued to teach high school home economics while I pursued the day-to-day work at the greenhouse. After our first son Eric was born, Lynn remained home and she decided to join the business and build its retail side. So in 1977, three years after our incorporation, Lynn became an officer and manager, a partner in business, as well as my wife, and we never looked back.

Peter: Your story is similar to so many others that exist in our industry right, down to either the husband or wife working outside the business during its early stage. When I first met you, Possum Run was nationally known as a supplier of rooted cuttings of fuchsia with a cultivar assortment second to none. Tell us more about the vegetative liner side of the business.

Justin: Possum Run around that same time entered the vegetative cutting business specializing in fuchsia cuttings. As the years progressed, we expanded the greenhouse range and added other vegetative products. We expanded our fuchsia stock to 240 varieties and named one 'Cape Horn', a perennial fuchsia. Our retail also grew with the expansion of seasonal and year-round collectible items. Lynn's background, along with her staff, became the area's go-to center for unique and beautiful gifts.

This coincided well with the greenhouse expansion and retail classic appeal. A waterfall, expansive and carefully engineered wooden rainbow bridge and barn renovation, along with the addition



Possum Run Greenhouse in Bellville, Ohio.

of an acre of Dutch glass production space, contributed to the allure that Possum Run created for our region. We were fortunate to provide cuttings through national and regional brokers while working with some of the world's best breeders.

Peter: This was about the time that I met you through our OFA work. I remember hearing you speak at Short Course; your passion for your fuchsia collection was infectious. Possum Run grew much larger than this single crop as you mentioned above. That played out seemingly at the same time as your industry service began, correct?

Justin: Yes, it did. Combined with a PBS TV special, several magazine articles and working with OSU faculty, Possum Run Greenhouse became known statewide, nationally, and internationally. Of special note, we would not have succeeded without the dedicated long-term staff that provided the day-to-day production commitment and customer service. They too deserve so much credit.

Their skill, dedication and passion provided me with the trust and confidence to become active in OFA, SAF, Ohio Farm Bureau and OSU often being away at critical times. Thus, my involvement with these organizations began and, over time, I hope I was able to contribute in a small way to their agenda and direction. Our industry is an industry of both art and science, with the most important component a

passion for sustainability. We were blessed to be a small part of it that also became a major part of our families' lives.

Peter: That's another great point, Justin, that dedicated people are essential to keep an operation running smoothly allowing key individuals the freedom to serve the greater industry. Over my decades of association with OFA, it amazed me to witness how the select group of past presidents committed not just the two years of service as president but also two years before that as vice president learning the ropes, and two after as immediate past president to assist the successor. You folks gave six years of your lives to help OFA evolve into its national role eventually growing into AmericanHort.

Please recap your experiences as a leading voice of our greenhouse industry at the national level. Take us through your journey starting when you became a greenhouse grower and owner to rising to OFA president to making a contribution at the highest level of our industry for many years.

Justin: My time with a major corporation in personnel paid dividends, as well as my military service. All this contributed to my confidence and development. It was nearly 30 years ago I was voted onto the OFA Board. Following that initial involvement, I spent the next 10 years in various leadership roles within the association as committee member, committee chairs and eventually the culmination of the presidency from 1999 to 2000.

During my time with OFA and work with SAF, two major outcomes came to fruition. Through much perseverance Congress created the Ornamental Plant Germplasm Center (OPGC) and the Floriculture Nursery Research Initiative (FNRI). Following my time at OFA came committee assignments with SAF and the election to the Board at SAF in Washington, D.C., During these 14 years, I met and worked with some of the finest people one could ever wish to call colleagues

and friends. It has been the most gratifying period of my life and long lasting.

Peter: OFA opened doors for countless fellow growers of ours, as well as members of our allied trades. The two of us participated together on committees, boards and conference programs. I enjoy comparing and contrasting our experiences from the businesses we operated to the ways we served our fellow growers given our respective skill sets and philosophies.

Justin: Well, Peter, you and I go back nearly 30 years in friendship and leadership positions, first serving on the OFA board and committees and including several years presenting programs at the Short Course. Our lives were similar in business and family and, while we both utilized the applied sciences, you were more familiar with the latter given your research training and its potential application in the greenhouse.

Peter: Again, you hit the nail on the head my friend. We indeed share the background of the family greenhouse operation in childhood and as career paths. What intrigues me is comparing how larger businesses like yours and small operations like mine share nearly identical line items on our budget sheets. The only difference from my view is that the larger operation has more "zeroes" following line item dollar amounts.

Over the years, I watched you and a handful of other fellow growers serve as OFA presidents. Completing the six year commitment appeared exhausting. Witnessing that, I decided not to accept an invitation to get in line to serve OFA in that capacity. Rather, I chose to keep my service focused on conducting research and bringing the science you referenced to fellow growers through education. In the end, we can all agree that it truly does take a village.

Are the challenges different for growers and policy makers to

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achieve common goals? How do we work with our politicians to realize local, state and national goals?

Justin: Academia needs to realize their existence is not the same as it was 50 years ago. Through technology and communication the world is at our doorstep. We need to create a system of focused science, we are in a war for survival and something needs to be better focused. Re-institute a Manhattan Project approach within entomology, pathology and horticulture or any

of the disciplines that impact the grower's world. We no longer can afford how the universities do things independently. Regarding the politicians, it would seem this would be a soft sell to them ... to adopt a rational resolution and proactive approach. The problem is the reality that universities will be slow to accept change.

Peter: As always, Justin, I enjoy your perspective on issues such as these. Thanks so much for sharing it with us today. [gpn](#)

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