

UNPLANNED MOMENTS

Many trade show organizers say that the best networking comes after the sessions are over, in the hallways, during coffee breaks, out on the street and in after-hours mingling. It always seemed a bit counter-intuitive to me that a trade show would tout all the opportunities outside its own planned education and networking, but then again, I'm usually tied to a booth handing out magazines, preparing for presentations, working on a show daily or putting the weekly e-newsletter together. I don't often have the luxury of wandering the halls and lounging with colleagues over coffee and a snack — not nearly as much as I'd like to, anyway.



Paige Worthy, managing editor
 Phone: (847) 391-1050
 E-mail: pworthy@sgcmail.com
 Blog: lawnandgardenretailer.wordpress.com
 Facebook: facebook.com/lawnandgardenretailer
 Twitter: @lgrmag

A recent exception: Tim's and my recent trip to Louisville for the ANLA Management Clinic. With no big trade show attached to it, it's our chance to attend all the sessions we'd like and spend time in between chatting with garden center owners and the rest of the industry's best and brightest. Organizers aren't kidding: The best networking with the industry's boldface names really *does* happen in the unplanned moments.

Meetings

As soon as we arrived at the airport, I spotted **Gino Pitera** from Gerten's on his way out to the taxi queue. Gino and I had met on a Garden Centers of America tour, so I waved hello. Then Tim and I hopped into a cab with him to the Galt House — GCA had its board meeting at this year's clinic — and talked about last year's business and the spring to come.

That night, after the welcome mixer, we ate dinner with **Laura Kunkle and Michelle Gaston** from OFA — an Association of Horticulture Professionals. OFA has a lot going on this year, including a new CEO, Michael Geary, at the helm starting this month.

At Nexus Corp.'s hospitality suite, where VP of Sales **Jeff Warschauer** was cooking up some divine hors-d'oeuvres, I sat down with **Renae Bobbett** of Beaver Bark Gift & Garden Center, last year's Merchandiser of the Year, and industry superstar **Ernest Wertheim**, to talk about garden center design and our plans for the rest of clinic.

As I lugged my laptop bag through the halls on our final afternoon in Louisville, I finally had a chance to meet **Steve McShane** of McShane's Nursery in Salinas, Calif., after hearing his name for two and a half years. Sometimes, just putting names to faces — even if there isn't time to stay and chat — can be an infinitely valuable connection.

But spontaneous networking needs a catalyst: The speakers, presentations and workshops provided a perfect inspirational springboard to get attendees' minds working and mouths moving. Lucky me: There were a few sessions that really catered to my interests, especially social media. **Suzi McCoy**, founder and president of the Garden Media Group, gave a presentation Monday afternoon on social media that got a small group of us talking. And talking. And talking. And when it was time to get ourselves to the Retail Swap Shop for more ideas from other garden centers, we decided to meet for dinner to continue our conversation. In the end, it was Suzi, **Kathy Garfield** from Spring Meadow Nursery, and **Melodie McDanal** and two of her colleagues from GardenHood Atlanta. We talked all about GardenHood's explosive success, generating buzz on Facebook months before their "soft open" last October.

Call to Action

Our first morning keynote speaker, Norm Brodsky, took a hard line when he told keynote attendees that they had 48 hours after they returned to their businesses to implement the things they'd learned at the clinic. If you were there, what did you take away — and have you taken the next step yet? If you didn't make it this year, please, get it into your budget. This, or the OFA Short Course, or a GCA Tour... Get yourself out there, see what others are doing and share your own brilliant ideas. 🌿

Paige Worthy

LAWN & GARDEN

Retailer

EDITORIAL

Editorial Office (847) 391-1019
Tim Hodson Editorial Director
 thodson@sgcmail.com
Paige Worthy Managing Editor
 pworthy@sgcmail.com
Jasmina Radjevic Associate Editor
 jradjevic@sgcmail.com
Jason Kenny Designer
 jkenny@sgcmail.com
Adam Terese Web Editor
 aterese@sgcmail.com

ADVERTISING

Sales Office (817) 731-9352
Bob Bellew Vice President, Group Publisher
 bbellew@sgcmail.com
Felix Schilling Account Manager
 felixschilling@sbcglobal.net
Amanda McAdam Integrated Accounts Manager
 amcadam@sgcmail.com
Kim Sammartino Integrated Accounts Manager
 ksammartino@sgcmail.com
Jill Smith Sales & Market Associate
 jsmith@sgcmail.com
Donna Aly Classified Advertising Manager
 daly@sgcmail.com
Michael Mansour Internet Sales Representative
 mmansour@sgcmail.com

STAFF

Circulation Office (847) 391-1042
Mike Serino Director of Circulation
 mserino@sgcmail.com
Vickie Crews-Anderson Director of Marketing & Communications
 vcrewsanderson@sgcmail.com
Sandi Stevenson Director of Creative Services
 sstevenson@sgcmail.com
Erica Rivera Advertising Coordinator
 erivera@sgcmail.com

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