

The People Issue

Maria Ortiz of Peoria Gardens, moves a poinsettia. Page 15: Inside the greenhouse of Smith Gardens, Andrea Avila-Aragon examines product with Joaquin Romero.

IT TAKES A NUMBER of essentials to transform a healthy seed, seedling, cutting or start into a market-ready plant or tree. There's water. Fertilizer. Pest management. Growing media for containerized plants, or healthy soil for those grown in the field.

If any of these are missing or unavailable, the product will suffer or die, but these things by themselves are not enough. Guiding the entire process from start to finish is the one true key ingredient for healthy, market-ready plants.

And that would be people.

It takes people to breed the plants, make the selections, know customer needs, propagate, plant, feed, water, treat, prune, transplant, weed, harvest, market, sell and ship nursery products (and we're sure we missed a few steps).

People like Andres Alamillo.

Andres attended kindergarten in Juarez, Mexico. His father got a student visa to attend college across the Rio Grande in El Paso, Texas, enabling Andres to attend grades 1–6 in that city. The family later moved to Kansas, where Andres developed an unusual curiosity for a high school student. "I took an interest in plants," he said.

He attended Kansas State University and majored in horticulture, with a focus in greenhouse management. Upon graduation, he was offered an internship at **Monrovia's** large nursery operation in Dayton, Oregon.

"I packed up my bed and bags and told my folks, 'I don't think I'm coming back to Kansas,'" he said.

Upon completing the internship, Andres accepted a full-time job there as a crew leader in charge of plant health. He was promoted to an inventory management role, working under Cesar Velazquez. In 2013, he accepted an offer from **Smith Gardens** in Aurora, Oregon to become their new inventory manager.

Through these experiences, he gained an understanding of true leadership. To him, it means being there for the team, understanding their needs, listening to their challenges, helping them problem solve, and taking issues to the managers above him when necessary.

In 2016, Smith Gardens promoted Andres, giving him an entirely new position — that of continuous improvement manager, reporting directly to the CEO. It gave him the opportunity to assist the company's four growing sites on the West Coast with improving their processes.

When he started, his personal impact was on his crew. Today, directly and indirectly, he's helping every employee in all four Smith locations be

more successful.

"I think it's really important for a leader to understand the business and paint a picture for their team," Andres said.

People. That's what it's about.

In Oregon, nurseries and their people ship close to \$1 billion worth of ornamental nursery and greenhouse plants per year. Those plants go everywhere — the United States and worldwide.

That's why you will seldom find a nursery owner or manager who does not appreciate the critical role of employees at every level, from entry-level worker to crew leader, from supervisor to manager, and from senior management to ownership.

They know that nurseries must compete to first, attract top leadership, second, provide an attractive work experience (including compensation) and finally, secure enough labor to keep their operations running.

That's daunting, but many industry leaders see a flip side.

"It's such a great time to get into the industry because there's so much opportunity," said Shane Brockshus, general manager of West Coast operations for **Bailey Nurseries**. "Everybody is clamoring for that next great person to add to their company." ©

