

### Achievement Through Ambition

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Matt Altman could have been anything he wanted. He went to Tufts University in Boston to study International Relations, so he could have been a diplomat or ambassador. He became fluent in Spanish, so he could have been a teacher or translator. And he travels to exotic locales, like India, Vietnam and Morocco, so he could have been a travel guide or a host on the Travel Channel.

Instead, Matt chose to work in his family's wholesale plant business. Now, that's not a step down by any means. In his short tenure at Altman Plants based in Vista, California, Matt has helped to build a new production facility from the ground up, become a divisional

general manager at the age of 22 and is now chief operating officer for the entire company.

So, you can see why he earned this year's Red Fox/Young Grower Award.

#### Growing up around growing

Altman Plants began as a "hobby" for Ken and Deena Altman in the mid-1970s. Deena's father had a retail nursery in Los Angeles and that was when the young couple started collecting cacti and succulents. Eventually, they had so many plants they decided to start selling them. Altman Plants was born and Matt, along with his younger brother Logan and sister Mara, were also born into the greenhouse business.

"Our house was on one of the nurseries," Matt recalls. "Unfortunately, it was a cactus nursery, so there were a lot of spines everywhere. It was a 7-acre nursery and definitely big enough for kids to ride their bikes around or run around and anytime you did that, you'd come back to the house and needed to get your tweezers out. So it was one of those things where by the time I was in high school, I was ready to move on from the cactus world. I definitely have plants in my blood, but at that point I was interested in seeing what else was out there."

This was when Matt decided to leave the comfort of California to attend college 3,000 miles away in Boston. He was interested in learning about countries around the world, including Latin America. Through his studies, Matt became fluent in Spanish and earned a differing view of politics and economic climates from around the globe.

After graduation, Matt decided to return to his family's business (and much warmer weather). He started with special projects, including bringing a new idea to fruition: selling live plants on the Internet, which now doesn't seem that far-fetched. But 12 years ago, it wasn't common for our industry. Matt presented his idea to a few large retailers. Although they were interested, their technology wasn't advanced enough to build and support sufficient volume.

"It didn't go as far as I would have liked at that time, but it got me more involved in the business," said Matt.

#### Salinas-bound

John Steinbeck once said, "A journey is a person in itself; no two are alike." Matt's next challenge was to pack up and leave his hometown again for a new adventure—this time to Salinas, California (which happens to be the birthplace of Mr. Steinbeck). Altman Plants had bought 20 acres of what used to be a cut flower nursery to use for production of annuals and perennials that the company was bringing in from their Southern California facility and Matt was asked to move seven hours north to help fill in for the previous general manager, who left after a few months on the job.

"I was a young guy; I thought I could do anything," said Matt, who then laughs and adds, "I [also] think no one else wanted to do it."

So Matt moved to Salinas and hired a new team that helped him grow those 20 acres to 120 acres over six years. It was an enormous responsibility for a kid right out of college. Matt said that he learned much of his business sense during those six years by "just doing," which added to the other challenges of trying to delegate to seasoned industry professionals.

"It's not easy for a 25-year-old to tell somebody who's been in the workforce for 20 years how you'd like them to do their job or give them constructive feedback," Matt said. "It was sometimes difficult. [But] I felt like the people who worked for me in Salinas did an amazing job and we really did create a good team there. That was like my formative experience. I learned a lot about nursery management and growing annuals and perennials."

#### All in the family

After six years as GM of the Salinas facility, Matt decided it was someone else's turn to take over, so he moved back to their main headquarters in

Vista. He was given the opportunity to implement some ideas and processes he developed in Salinas for the Vista location, earning him the title of COO—a role he's held since 2006.

"Ken and Deena started Altman Plants out of a passion for plants, so the business grew through our own methods—my parents aren't trained in business," Matt said matter-of-factly. "We think of ourselves as good business people, but we've definitely come a long way over the last 10 years in terms of systems and procedures. In general, as you get bigger as a company, you have to be a little more formal about your processes and it takes a lot of communication and it takes more people."

And just because he grew up in this business, doesn't mean he ever felt "pressured" to be a part of it. Although he and his brother are involved (Logan works in the sales department), their sister moved to New York to become a writer.

"My parents never pressured any of us to join the business," said Matt. "I think there's more pressure on yourself ... if you're going to be involved in the business, you want to be able to carry the family flag and perform at a high level to be a good example to the rest of the people in the company from the beginning. [My parents] have always encouraged and been supportive. They've always expressed that they'd love to have any of us in the business, but they never tried to convince us that we needed to be."

The last few Young Grower winners weren't fortunate enough to grow up among greenhouses ... which some may consider a stroke of luck (it wouldn't necessarily be easy to work with your mom/dad/brother, etc.). But Matt wouldn't change a thing.

"It's amazing to work with your family," he explained. "That's one of the reasons that brought me into working in this business. There's just a special thing about having your name on the company. It's inspiring to know how important it is to your family. I don't think there's anything that could be more motivating than working for your family. We like to be successful. We like to perform at a high level and we're all on the same page on that."

### Taking risks, embracing change

Now that Matt is fully entrenched in his management role (all of the GMs at their five major locations report directly to him), he's focused on growing the business and dealing with those challenges. Like when Target decided to close all of its garden centers. Altman Plants was the main grower for all of the Target stores on the West Coast and Florida, so when the retailer decided to get out of selling green goods in 2010, it was a significant blow to the Altman's top line—more than \$20 million. But panicking was not what the Altmans did. While exiting the business with Target, they developed new product lines, including roses and other flowering shrubs. They earned new customers and, with the support of current customers, they were able to more than replace the business they lost.

"Ken provided tremendous leadership to the company during that time," Matt said. "Instead of looking at ways to reduce costs, we focused on our ability to replace sales. There were market opportunities the customers were interested in and the entire company worked to recover what we had lost. We were able to maintain our personnel and our team of people and that's probably the most critical thing ... we wanted to be able to do that."

And speaking of personnel, Matt stressed that much of his success is attributed to the 1,500 people who are employed by Altman Plants (this encompasses all locations at peak).

"I'm honored to be recognized with this award, but everything that I've done I feel like I should get partial credit for because it takes a team of people to do things in our business," Matt said. "I'm passionate about our people that we have—we have a really great team of people and it's a lot of fun to work with them."

And Matt says these are the people who continue to help his family's company move forward into the unknown that is the future of the horticulture industry.

"We have seen a lot of consolidation in our industry, but I think there will be more," said Matt. "And, hopefully, what it will mean is a consolidation of resources that will allow all of us to produce more value out of what we're doing—we have to be able to produce products that connect the whole supply chain to the consumer. And really putting everybody's effort into specific products because that's what's going to get visibility in the marketplace."

### Matt of the future

Matt says he thinks there will be a dramatic shift in plant breeding and the way plants will be brought to market, including with e-commerce. We're already seeing some new introductions with a shorter cycle from breeder to consumer—a trend that will increase, he believes.

"When you look back in 20 years, I think we're going to see a bigger leap in the breeding of plants than we'll have seen in the previous," Matt explained. "That's going to be exciting because there's going to be opportunities to make plants that work that much better for gardeners and there's going to be opportunities to market those plants and be a part of that. And that will also give us an opportunity to provide more customized products for different groups of people."

Of course, an obvious assumption would be that Matt will be taking over the reins as president of Altman Plants when his dad decides to retire. It's a role that he wouldn't mind sharing with his brother Logan.

"My brother and I work pretty well together," Matt said. "Should Ken and Deena decide to retire, the company would be in good hands. And I'm happy to work with [our parents] as long as they want to work with us," he adds with a chuckle. **GT**