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Presidential Address Horticulture Challenges and Directions

Janet C. Cole

*Department of Horticulture and Landscape Architecture, Oklahoma State University, 360 Ag Hall, Stillwater,
OK 74078-6027*

While thinking about topics for this presidential address, I looked through some of the old *ASHS Proceedings*. One of the things that I found was that, in 1938, J.K. Shaw from Massachusetts State College was the president of ASHS. Apparently a few things do not change with time. I thought it particularly interesting that as he began his presidential address, he noted that “The first printed copy of our By-laws requires that the president shall “deliver an address at each regular meeting” and this is one section that has never been amended.” He went on to say “Since then no president has escaped this punishment. If you think it is the members who are punished I merely remind you that it is because you have failed to amend or abolish this particular By-law.” We are now 67 years later, and the by-law is still on the books nationally and regionally, so here we are today. I would like to take a few minutes to express my impressions of our profession and some of the challenges that we face in being productive horticulturists in academic positions.

Each new year brings hopes and challenges. In 2004, nature challenged us on a number of occasions, including floods, earthquakes, hurricanes, and the tsunami that has been so devastating. Given a choice, we would likely avoid these experiences; however, the choice is not always ours so we must deal with the results.

Horticulture as a profession has had its own set of challenges. Recent years have brought budget cuts, less available external funding for applied horticultural research, and declining enrollments, particularly in production horticulture, to those of us in academic positions. Industry has also experienced a shift, as the service side—landscape maintenance and tree care, for example—of horticulture has exploded over the past several years. On the production side, horticultural crops—edible crops as well as ornamentals—remain important agricultural products in many states. The horticulture services industries and producers alike are desperately searching for qualified individuals to fill positions at all levels—entry to upper management. There is a growing concern among horticulture managers as to who will run their companies when they are gone.

Consumers desire horticultural goods and services. According to the National Gardening Association and Harris Interactive, 85 million U.S. households spent \$39.6 billion at lawn and garden retail outlets in 2002. The Professional Landcare Network, formerly the Associated Landscape Contractors of America, reports that in 2003 consumers spent a total of \$37.9 billion on professional landscape, lawn, and tree care services—up from \$28.9 billion spent in 2002. This translates to an increase of more than 30% in just one year, not to mention the value of the many horticultural products that are used for food both in the U.S. and abroad.

Compared to other agricultural enterprises, horticulture production tends to occur on relatively small acreages, but high-value crops are produced from those small acreages. Unfortunately, because of the small land areas that are used for horticultural production, the interests of horticulturists tend to be overlooked by legislators. In many states, horticulture is underrepresented as statisticians attempt to determine farmgate values of crops. This can lead to the incorrect impression that horticulture is not a large player in the agricultural community or in the economics of various states or the nation as a whole.

Agricultural producers have found some advantage in pulling together to have a larger voice in legislative decision making and in presenting marketing programs to the public. Examples include groups, like the cotton producers, the dairy industry, and the Beef Council, that work with lobbyists who interact with legislators regularly to make them aware of producer concerns. Many of these industry organizations have also created national marketing campaigns that encourage the general public to look for and use their products. Because of the diversity in horticulture, horticulturists have not been as successful in uniting to address issues of concern in legislative sessions or in educating the public about products and services.

How does this affect us as we go about our research, teaching, and extension programming? The Hatch Act of 1887 established experiment stations to “aid in acquiring and diffusing among the people of the United States useful and practical information on subjects connected with agriculture, and to promote scientific investigation and experiments respecting the principles and applications of agricultural science.” Those of us who are employed in positions related to experiment stations in our respective states are then charged with conducting fundamental and applied research related to horticulture. Our fundamental research serves the scientific community by providing a basis for further investigation. Our applied research serves the various industries that we serve. Thus, we are a resource for producers and consumers. Our research can lead to better-quality horticultural products and reduced production costs. That information is made available to industry and consumers in part through our extension programming. It is also made available to the students in our courses. Those students then take the information to the industry through internships and career positions. Industry looks to university faculty for information, but they also look to us for well-trained graduates who can step into career positions.

How do we continue to have productive programs with limited funds and limited enrollments? Unfortunately there is no easy answer to this question. It will require some self-assessment by individuals and by departments. By evaluating ourselves, we can identify our strengths and expand upon them. Unfortunately, we cannot be everything to everyone, so we must prioritize and be the best that we can be given the constraints placed upon us.

Over the years, many horticulture programs have been combined with other programs to create conglomerate departments. While this saves some administrative costs, it results in some loss of identity for the departments involved. This loss of identity has posed challenges for some faculty members in obtaining funding and maintaining student numbers. Some departments have found ways to maximize their strengths while relying on programs in nearby states to provide help in other areas. Thus, regional programs have been created that have been very successful in some cases. Regardless of whether programs are offered on a regional basis or not, costs of programming are rising, so we

must be creative and find ways to disseminate information for less cost. Technology has allowed us to offer more programs using distance education via the Internet and other tools. This has saved on fuel costs, but it has not necessarily saved faculty time, since creating educational modules for distance education can be very time-consuming. Technology has also allowed us to shift some of our costs to those receiving the information. Rather than printing information in large quantities and placing it in county extension offices, the information can be placed on Web sites and clients can print information as it is needed.

Teaching programs are also evolving over time. Just like the seasons, horticulture enrollments are cyclical. In the late 1980s to early 1990s, enrollments were low, and we were searching for new ways to recruit students. At that time, ASHS created a recruiting video to try to introduce prospective students to horticulture. In my own department, we spent a lot of time visiting high-school career fairs and working with junior-college horticulture programs to identify students who might be interested in continuing their horticulture education. In the late 1990s, enrollments increased, and recruiting became less of a priority. It appears that we may need to step up some of our recruiting efforts again as enrollments appear to be declining—particularly enrollments in programs that are primarily production oriented. Partnering with industry to recruit students to horticulture may be beneficial to allow students to see what career options are available with a horticulture degree. Salaries and benefits for industry positions must be adequate for graduates to repay student loans and have a reasonable lifestyle. It is not uncommon to advise horticulture students that horticulture is an enjoyable profession, but salaries are not nearly as high as those expected in some other professions. Low salaries are a disincentive to students contemplating horticulture careers.

Along with increasing recruiting efforts, we must evaluate our teaching programs to be sure that we are offering relevant courses that will prepare students well for their chosen careers. Not only does this include the technical aspects of horticulture, but also information on business practices and computer use among other topics. Students must also take advantage of opportunities offered to them outside of the classroom, including extracurricular club activities, internships, study abroad opportunities, and independent study research projects.

Horticulture, like the world around us, is ever-changing. Our challenge is to adapt to those changes and maintain productive programs that provide vital information to our clients—whether those clients are the students that we teach or the industries that we serve.