President's Address

Meetings, Membership, and Publications: The Fabric of ASHS

by Frederick S. Davies

It's a pleasure to welcome you to the 102nd annual meeting of the American Society for Horticultural Sciences held in sunny Las Vegas, Nevada. It's difficult to believe that we're actually meeting in Las Vegas after all these years. Furthermore, next year's meeting is in beautiful and exciting New Orleans. I promised myself that I wouldn't make any comments about this monumental, albeit shocking, change in philosophy related to selection of annual meeting sites. Although I applaud the efforts of the Board of Directors (BOD), I can't help but wonder what our conservative forefathers and founders would think and would they approve? Imagine Liberty Hyde Bailey decked out in his black suit and hat playing blackjack or Spencer Beach celebrating unabashedly after winning at the nickel slots. Somehow I believe they would approve of having meetings in favorable locations as long as they are technically strong and professional.

My dilemma is to formulate and deliver a motivating, poignant and memorable speech without having a centennial, new millennium, or other auspicious occasion as a theme or central focus. For years I've wanted to talk about moving forward into the new millennium or to provide inspiration for the next 100 years. Having a 102nd meeting is like celebrating my 56th birthday—it has to occur but is as stimulating as watching a Super Bowl without Janet Jackson. Instead, you'll have to be content to hear comments about such mundane but important areas as meetings, membership, and publication policies, some of which were covered in my *Reflections* columns over the past year. My central theme will be to focus on the social aspects of our society and how our members have been and are interacting to create a strong, vibrant society. Such interactions provide the underlying fabric of ASHS.

Successful, well-attended annual meetings have been an important contributor to our longevity as a highly successful society. The meeting provides a forum for the exchange of scientific ideas via technical sessions, symposia and colloquia, and workshops, but, equally important, allows for very important cultural and social interactions. Recently, interest in the social aspects of the meetings have declined considerably, possibly because of the economic, business, and personal pressures we're all feeling. For example, just look at the poor participation in our alumni functions over the past several years. Members used to come early to the meetings and stay late. Now many people come for only a day or two, further testifying to the busy lives we lead. Sometimes, though, we take ourselves too seriously. The Europeans still seem to be doing well (look at the strength of the Euro compared to the dollar.) even though they average 30 to 40 vacation days a year compared to our 10 to 12. These meetings provide a great opportunity, often overlooked, to renew and reestablish relationships as well as to make new friends and colleagues.

The annual meetings also reinforce notions about our academic system. Look around you. Who are you sitting with and why? Likely, there are several important levels of relationships around you. There are those of you who are sitting alone. If so please come and see me and I'll put you on a committee or sign you up as a consulting editor. Becoming involved in society affairs is an important first step in weaving yourself into the fabric of ASHS (my apologies for the weak metaphor).

Another and very significant relationship is that of graduate students and their major advisors. If you're sitting with your current advisor you probably had no option. If you're sitting with your former advisor you should probably seek immediate medical attention! This is an opportunity to escape! The student–advisor relationship is predicated on the medieval indentured servant model, although typically an indentured servant was exploited for only 7 years.

Now for the first of my snow and ice stories. When I was in grad school there were no contracts or sensitivity training sessions, as many universities have now. Professors weren't required to get in touch with their feelings or those of their students. My major advisor for my MS degree always carried a large, heavy briefcase filled with data. One time we were standing, just he and I, in a room and he said, "Someone should pick up that briefcase."

I had just started grad school, but did figure out after the fifth request that he probably wasn't referring to himself. Try doing that to a student now. In another instance, my advisor called me at 6:00 AM on Saturday to help move an air conditioner at his house. This request had followed a very late Friday night at the library, but I willingly complied. Again, just try to get away with this today! Certainly, many aspects of the student–advisor relationships have changed, I guess for the better, over the years.

Another universal constant is that your advisor is always your advisor even when you're old. My PhD advisor still gives me advice whether it's solicited or not. And I find myself doing the same with former students. But, this is the system, as arcane and archaic as it appears, that holds our society together at a fundamental level and provides an intertwined complex matrix of relationships. It's always interesting to see one of your own former students with his or her first student. Remember, this is the student who said he'd never treat his student like you treated him. But, oh, how soon they forget! This interrelated family tree also makes you aware not to insult or disparage anyone unless you know where they're from or who they've worked with. No one likes to hear the phrase, "Oh, you worked with Fred Davies. That's interesting," followed by a snicker, an eye roll, and a polite cough, or muffled laughter.

Some of you are probably sitting together because you were graduate students together. This may be our strongest, longest-lasting bond. It's almost like going through combat together. Graduate students have always provided essential information and support, especially to new students. Much of my initial instruction on lab techniques or how to register for courses came from senior students in the lab and not necessarily from professors. This is also how we found out about which courses were good or bad. I do the same thing in my program and it's usually very effective. On the other hand, grad students often work in the same areas and compete for grades and, more important, jobs. Consequently, there are also examples of fellow grad students who have a lot of animosity toward one another, which may last for an entire career. Nevertheless, in most cases, it is the positive associations that persist throughout entire careers and that contribute greatly to the value of our meetings. The society offers the opportunity at annual conferences to begin as grad students discussing plans for a family and, within a seemingly short period, end up talking about grandchildren and retirement.

Many of you are sitting with a colleague from another institution. The colleague to colleague relationship is another one that is forged over time. It is common to meet new colleagues from all over the world at oral or poster sessions, symposia or colloquia, and workshops. Many regional programs have been established via annual meetings in this way. These collegial relationships also promote joint projects and grant-writing opportunities and sources of new graduate students. Involvement in ASHS committees is one important way of promoting and fostering these types of relationships.

The fabric of the society is important, but so are the day-to-day operations. At this meeting, the BOD implemented two important policy changes: abstract prepayment and a facilities usage fee. Abstract prepayment was intended to reduce the number of no-shows at the meeting who disrupt the continuity of the meeting and cost ASHS time and money. The facilities usage fee encourages members to stay in the host hotel, thus subsidizing meeting room costs and avoiding very costly penalties for noncompliance with the hotel contract. It will take a few years to determine how successful these programs are.

The overall quality of our meetings continues to be excellent, and many volunteers, and especially our accomplished staff, work many hours to make them successful. However, we're all aware that we compete with many other organizations and that time and travel money are always at a premium. Therefore, we have to be competitive and innovative. Many members would like a shorter, more-targeted meeting. For example, having all the extension or education programs on a single day. I like the general concept,

but worry that this could have an impact on our room-night minimums and might lessen the involvement of these two important segments of our society. I think there should be a minimum length of time for meetings to provide the technical and social interaction discussed previously.

Currently, and certainly in the future, the digital age will be an important part of any meeting. We are already showcasing talks such as the Tex Frazier lecture and the presidential speech and posters via video taping that is available to our members on the web. This will allow us to reach members who cannot attend the meetings, or reach a whole new untapped group of horticulturists worldwide. Again, I would like to see these videos augment, supplement, and complement our meetings, not replace them.

We can also save time and money by moving more to poster sessions and doing much of our committee work via the internet. I know that oral sessions remain popular and will never be totally eliminated, but there are some difficult decisions ahead concerning our use of time and space at the meetings.

Finally, the most important reason why members attend the meeting is the technical content of the program. It's essential to have working groups very much involved with program development and that we continue to have current, strong symposia and workshops. The BOD is considering making some changes in its structure to increase working group involvement in the society. The staff and BOD will also continue to improve our technical capabilities.

Publications are our most important function as a Society from a prestige and financial perspective and will always be, although their form and mode of delivery may differ in the future. Quality and timeliness are characteristics we must continue to maintain at high levels. Again, there are many other journals in which to publish. Several important changes have occurred in publication procedures in the new millennium. For example, we've moved to a more streamlined and efficient system with higher accountability, which is based on having high-quality editors in chief and consulting editors rather than associate editors. The electronic review system is improving and has greatly shortened publication time from 9.5 months a few years ago to 1 to 2 months currently. I hope to see the number of electronic publications increase with a concomitant decrease or at least stabilization in publication costs and, ultimately, the elimination of costly paper reprints. Certainly we're moving aggressively in that direction.

There has been some controversy over the subject matter of each of our journals. Before 1995, *HortScience* was intended for preliminary research of all types and the *Journal* for more complete, in-depth studies related to all areas of horticulture. *HortTechnology* came along in 1990 and has attained its intended goal of being the primary outreach publication for the society. In 1995 the BOD decided to separate the content of the journals based on a continuum ranging from very applied (*HortTechnology*), to applied (*HortScience*), to fundamental (*Journal*). While this arrangement has been functionally effective, I disagree with the concept that properly conducted, scientifically sound applied research does not belong in the *Journal*. To many applied horticulturists, this established a hierarchical system, whether real or perceived, by many scientists. Recently we've also seen an increase in molecular biology papers in the *Journal* and *HortScience*, which I support, but not at the expense of publishing applied horticulture. It's likely this perceived problem will be remedied by emphasizing electronic dissemination of all ASHS information and possibly by combining some or all of our journals, as has been the subject of discussion for years.

No presidential address would be complete or relevant without a discussion of membership. The number of members has been declining since 1995, but appears to be leveling off at around 3000. If anyone ever reads this speech 10 years from now, I hope that the above statement is still correct. The reasons for the decline are obvious, and some trends, i.e., a decrease in the number of horticulturists trained, may not be reversible. But, we are continuing to pursue new potential members at 2-year schools and nonland-grant horticulture schools, as suggested by President Cary Mitchell last year, and hope to get them involved by providing several sources of information via the web. These are potential long-term solutions to the membership dilemma. We should continue to keep membership costs as low as possible while providing more services. Yes, more for less, rather than less for more, as is the situation with many enterprises. I

hope you'll continue to support our Endowment Fund and travel grants for students, which are very cost-effective ways of increasing the number of new, young, vibrant members. At this meeting, the society supported 70 domestic travel grants of \$500 each and four international grants of \$750 each. We will continue to pursue our new millennium goal of \$500,000 in the Endowment Fund corpus, which is now in reach. In the future we can also promote ASHS and increase membership by expanding our web-based programs. The technology is constantly improving and now is accessible to many people.

We should also expand our worldwide membership through changes in membership price structure based on the economic conditions of the member's country. Currently, almost one-third of our membership is international and we have a great opportunity to reach out to potential new members in many countries. Again, the electronic age will allow us to reach these important potential members in a cost-effective manner.

Our industry participation and membership numbers have been declining for several years, partly due to industry reorganization and partly because we haven't been providing the types of programs that industry needs. Last year E. Barclay Poling and his colleagues conducted an excellent, focused, and timely symposium on anthracnose problems in the strawberry industry. This is the type of program that ASHS needs to promote in the future to bring industry support and participation back to our society.

Governance and administration are so vital to the success of any organization. Your BOD and headquarters staff are continually looking at ways to improve services, while keeping costs to a minimum. There has been a steady reduction in our ASHS staff number over the past several years through attrition and reorganization. A few years ago we had 14 full-time employees, now we have 9 full-time and 2 part-time employees, and it appears that further reductions in staff number would adversely affect services, especially publication timing. Everyone is working at or near capacity, which is the case for most of the rest of us, too. I know even as a university professor that we're asked to do more and more with less and less.

We've gone through some stressful times *viz.*, building costs and book depreciation. But, currently we have an excellent leased facility that fits our staff and that is economically competitive with other urban areas. Our lease expires in 2010 and this will give us a great opportunity to reevaluate our space needs. A topic that arises every few years relates to moving our headquarters out of the Washington, D.C., area. Several studies have been done on this controversial topic and all agree that a move of this time is not best for the society, either economically or functionally. However, the BOD and staff are interested in the overall welfare of the Society and as we move more and more to electronic publication where employees are not place-bound, such a move may be feasible and economically justified.

Your BOD has also been restructured several times over the past 30 years again to improve efficiency and reduce costs. As I mentioned in my *Reflections* column, we have eliminated one BOD meeting, reducing the annual number from four to three because many of the more routine tasks can be done via email. In addition, we may need to take a look at our current vice-president structure related to working-group function. We would still maintain our divisions, but would involve working groups more in the nomination process. I would also like to see some of our committees become more involved, which, in addition, will get more of our membership involved. It is also possible to get more of our international members involved on committees via the internet.

In summary, we're going to see great strides made in the area of publications, including improved web services, faster publication turn around, streaming videos, etc. We'll also see shorter, more focused meetings in a variety of favorable locations. I'm confident that we'll be meeting in New Orleans next year, despite Katrina's efforts! Nevertheless, I do hope that we never lose sight of the value of face-to-face interactions among members. This provides the fabric of our strong, successful society for the future as we move into the next decade.

I've very much enjoyed serving as your president this past year and want to thank all of you who have volunteered for committees. I also want to thank the BOD and our very capable ASHS staff for their support, diligence, and exceptional efforts.

Please have a wonderful, fun, safe, and economically successful meeting. See you next year in the Crescent City.