Challenges in the 70’s for Extension Horticulture
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Horticulture is entering a new and exciting era with unique and unlimited opportunities if only we will be imaginative and respond to the needs of all people. The general public, elected officials and even university administrators are beginning to demonstrate a greater interest in, and awareness of, the potentials of horticulture. The challenge is clear if only we will accept it.

There are many reasons for the expanding role of Horticulture in today's society. The recent emphasis on natural beauty and environmental quality are but two. Horticulture offers positive approaches to the maintenance and enrichment of the urban environment.

Commercial producers of horticultural commodities are seeking, more than ever before, technical help and guidance. Horticultural industries have always been heavy users of labor, but the availability of labor is dwindling and wage rates are climbing. Labor efficiency is the major problem confronting commercial horticulture today. Agricultural engineers, agricultural economists and others are vital in seeking solutions. However, it is the horticulturist that is called upon to integrate the various new developments into total production systems designed to minimize labor.

The Extension Specialist will play an increasingly important role providing he demonstrates competence and the willingness to develop carefully planned positive action programs. Our clientele are responding favorably to more imaginative and aggressive programs. Not every new program will be successful, however, we must think positive and not be lulled into the lack of activity for fear of making mistakes. It is easy to keep busy with those activities that will not “rock the boat,” but this is also the road to oblivion. The Extension Horticulturist should assume a leadership role in the development of action programs. If he doesn’t, someone else will.

There was a time when an Extension Horticulturist could be independent in the development of programs. In the field he was the man that possessed all of the answers and, too frequently, he jealously guarded this role and built a fence around “his” area. This approach has no place in the 70’s. The Extension Horticulturist will remain in a leadership position involving other extension specialists and researchers as the need arises, provided he earns the role. To be effective in this role, he must make every attempt to build the image of the “team” and of all the individuals on that team.

The role of the extension specialist today is expanding rapidly. It is becoming increasingly important that the extension specialist be more actively involved and more closely related to the total research effort. There is no time to wait for published reports before action programs are planned. Producers are knocking at the researcher's door. It is the role of the extension specialist to keep actively abreast of the plans and programs of the researcher and develop a relationship that can be beneficial to both. The extension specialist often has insight into the problems in the field that are not recognized by the researcher. Together they can make an effective team.

As extension takes on an expanding role and becomes more actively involved in research interpretation, there is an increasing demand for specialists holding the PhD degree. It is, therefore, important that extension take an active role in training future specialists. More extension-sponsored graduate assistantships and fellowships are needed to provide the extension specialist orientation. Greater attention should be placed upon educational programs geared to more adequately satisfy the demands and needs of the extension specialist. The requirements for an effective extension specialist demand that he not only be technically qualified and an effective communicator, but that he also be able to develop a strong rapport with the clientele he is charged to serve and be able to readily apply new findings to field situations.

In many sections of the country there is a trend toward increasing the numbers of area horticulturists located in the field. The area horticulturist often has the opportunity to develop a closer working relationship with the industry of his area than the specialist with statewide responsibilities. Developed properly, such programs can greatly facilitate the effectiveness of the statewide specialist.

As commercial horticultural commodity producers become more highly specialized and refined in their operations there develops a need to offer more highly technical “in depth schools” for specific audiences. If extension is to continue to remain in a leadership role, programs must be developed to satisfy the needs of the more progressive elements of the industry. A leadership image can not be maintained by merely following.

Some of the more intriguing challenges of the 70's lie in the areas of environmental enrichment and the use of ornamental plants in urban areas. As areas become more highly urbanized the demands placed upon county extension offices mount and shift in the direction of horticulture. Consequently, trained horticulturists are sought for urban county agent positions. Greater effort must be directed toward the recruitment and training of people to qualify for such positions. Vocational Horticulture programs are also expanding rapidly in urban areas yet there is a shortage of trained instructors. Extension horticulturists might well find it to their advantage to more actively recruit people to become adequately trained to effectively fill these positions.

The challenges of the 70's are many and the demands are greater than ever before. This necessitates more careful planning in the establishment of priorities. The horticultural specialist must program time to work with researchers and to travel if he is to keep ahead of rapidly advancing technology. He must also block out time to devote to writing and program preparation. It is too easy to allow other activities to infringe upon these high priority areas.

The opportunities for Extension Horticulture in the 70's are great, however, if we are to capitalize upon these opportunities we must do a more effective job of assessing the needs and wants of our clientele and of developing programs to satisfy these needs. We must also do a more effective job than we have in the past of communicating the importance of horticulture in today's society and the relevance of our programs.