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Tropical Horticulture: A Challenge

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Fernandez

The ASHS Tropical Region was founded in 1951 by a group of enthusiastic horticulturists working in the Caribbean and Latin America. This group was greatly inspired by Wilson Popenoe, a visionary in tropical horticulture who was dedicated to actions supporting agricultural development and the conservation of resources in Central America.

Popenoe's thoughts and actions were always guided by an intense, perhaps obsessive, interest in youth. He dedicated many years of his life to the Panamerican School of Agriculture, an institution which, over the years, graduated well-trained agronomists, many of whom today direct agricultural activities in several countries in the American tropics.

Popenoe's dedication to young people also was felt by members of the ASHS Tropical Region. In his first newsletter, dated Nov. 1953, Popenoe wrote that, "it was particularly gratifying to note, during the meetings, the presence of a considerable number of young horticulturists, not yet members of the Society but good prospects for the future".

Popenoe's inspiration remained with the Region over the years. Since then, the group has met on 32 separate occasions in almost every country in the American tropics. These meetings have served traditionally to bring together renowned horticulturists and students in the field.

Young horticulturists take this opportunity to present before an audience the results of their first research projects. This material often evolves into the student's first publication. At the meetings, the students make presentations on an alternating basis with experienced horticulturists. To their surprise, many of the students discover that their mentors are perfectly normal human beings with whom they can be friends! The horticulturists often provide the students with support in the form of advice, publications, seeds, and even help for those admitted to foreign universities so that they can continue their studies.

The presentations of research projects in the Spanish language is now a long tradition of the Region. I refer once again to Popenoe's first newsletter, which reads, "most of the talks and discussions were in the Spanish Language, it having been evident from the beginning that this would be more advantageous than the use of English." This tradition aside, the members of the Tropical Region have been bilingual, and it has been very interesting to watch the North American members progressively improve their Spanish and the Latin Americans their English.

As with any other group involving human beings, there have been problems over the past 35 years. In spite of this, the group has met on 32 occasions, failing to meet only 3 times. In all these years, the Region has sent 112 newsletters, and, in 1956, it began publication of annual reports, which although not always timely, nevertheless are constant. The group has made efforts to promote horticulture as the region's principal productive activity and has taken advantage of some of the meetings and held short courses, or round table discussions. After its meeting in 1977 in the Dominican Republic, a group of prominent horticulturists remained for a few more days to present their findings on promoting horticulture in the region. In Honduras, well-known citrus experts held a symposium on citrus cultivation in the tropics. On another occasion a symposium was held on temperate climate fruit cultivation in the tropics.

After attending several meetings of the Tropical Region, some members of the Region have become experts in tropical horticulture.

Similarly, the Region has worked to direct the exchange of publications, experiences, and vegetative materials for propagation to improve and expand horticultural production in the area.

Unfortunately, however, during the last few years, economic and political problems in the area have had a negative impact on the activities of the ASHS Tropical Region. Membership declined from a high of more than 500 members in 35 countries to less than 150. Many members in the developing countries still have difficulty keeping up with their payments, even though the annual dues is still only US \$12.00. In spite of these adverse conditions, the Region is very much solvent for the time being.

This crisis affecting the Tropical Region has caused the parent Society just concern. This concern can be seen in some recent articles on the international status of the Society (1-3) and its efforts to support the Tropical Region.

The situation affecting the Tropical Region is not hopeless and is being solved with effort and good will on everyone's part. For example, the Society succeeded in summoning a meeting in Miami in 1984 and in Trinidad and Tobago in 1985. After the 1985 Meeting more than 200 members had been recruited. Arrangements are being made to update publications and to ensure the timely distribution of pending reports. A new, dynamic Secretary-Treasurer has been appointed, and, along with several members, he is working hard to spark enthusiasm for the Tropical Region. Keeping with these efforts, bylaws are being revised to be more in tune with the changing times.

Externally, the Interamerican Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA) is providing external support in terms of economic assistance and useful services (dues collection in national currency in the countries, editorial services, distribution of publications, secretarial and other general services of great benefit).

As things stand today, and with everyone's support, the Tropical Region seems to have a bright future. If all the actions outlined are carried out, the Tropical Region should not face major problems in the near future.

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Unfortunately, however, the same can not be said for the region as a whole. I could not but wonder just how secure our future really is if the region we live in is in crisis.

Someone once said that by exporting coffee, bananas, sugar, cacao, etc., the region was in fact dedicated to producing the basic ingredients used in "desserts". Since desserts are not essential for survival, the demand for these products and the price they command are in constant flux. The "Caribbean Basin Initiative", which opened the doors of the United States to exports from the region, soon revealed that a major problem with the tropical countries was that they had little to export. Most of the countries could not take advantage of this opportunity!

Perhaps a change to other horticultural products, such as vegetables, fruits, and ornamental plants, would enable the tropical countries to take advantage of opportunities in world trade.

There is also an urgent need to prepare more and better-trained horticulturists. ASHS and its Tropical Region could help qualified candidates from the Caribbean take full advantage of scholarships in the field of horticulture offered at universities in the United States. Furthermore, arrangements could be made to take advantage of professors on sabbatical from both groups who could share their experience and improve the quality of universities in the area. Joint research projects could be developed to evaluate new plant materials of interest to the region.

Specific studies and advisory services are needed on very concrete problems and issues. Members of the Tropical Region could explore our needs in terms of policy studies, market opportunities for horticultural products, legal matters to regulate this market, plant protection restrictions, and other topics. Similarly, specific problems could be presented on plagues and diseases, product classification, packaging and presentation, and transportation, to name a few. The parent Society could find among its Members experienced horticulturists who could, rapidly and simply, provide solutions to those studies or problems.

The parent Society also could be of great help in the field of communications, by stimulating the dissemination of the experiences of its Members in the Tropical Region and seeking ways to facilitate the publication of works written by Tropical Region members. Publication in more than one language would be a tremendous help.

Finally, the realization of some of these ideas requires financing. I am certain, however, that a project well-developed by specialists from both our groups and presented at an opportune moment to a qualified financial organization could produce the desired results, especially in light of the Caribbean Basin Initiative. There are many institutions that would be interested in financing one or several well-prepared, technically supported projects. The governments of the United States and Canada, private in-

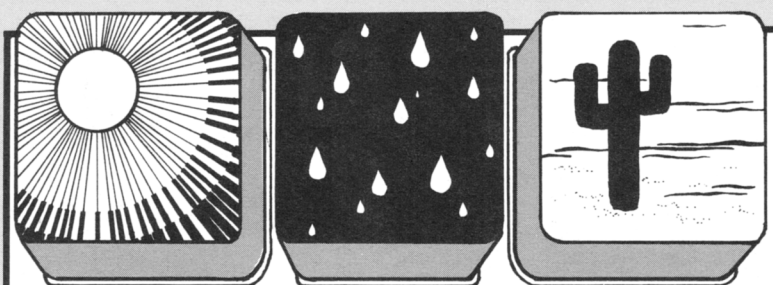
dustries, and foundations are but a few of the sources that could be exploited.

The real challenge clearly goes beyond a parent society's concern and support for an affiliate group. The real challenge is for the parent society and other similar institutions to orient their efforts toward Latin America and the Caribbean as a whole, demonstrating the great potential of tropical horticulture as the most expedient solution to the region's economic and social problems.

With this goal in mind, closer ties between ASHS and other supporting institutions and the Tropical Region would work to find ways to make viable the ideas of all the groups, leading to concrete actions that could have a profound and significant effect on the standard of living of the people in the continent's tropical countries.

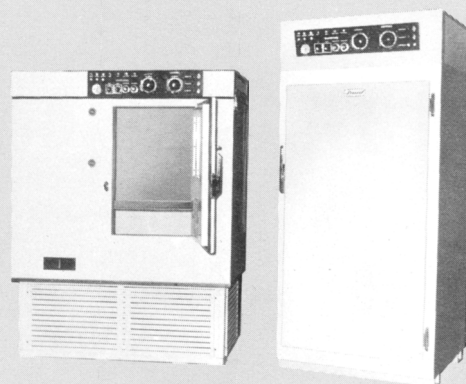
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