# Readers' Forum

## Participation

**John M. Gerber**

E.B. Poling's criticism of participatory research and education (PR&E) in "Strawberry Plasticulture in North Carolina: I. Developing a Competitive Horticultural Industry Requires 'Experts,' Not Participatory Groups" [*HortTechnology* 3(4):400–403, 1993] demonstrates a lack of appreciation of the conceptual foundation of this model. In his own words, Poling suggest that he uses a PR&E model when he writes:

"A front line extension specialist and applied researcher (split extension / research appointment) can have the best perspective on the problems of a state commodity group by way of frequent contacts with agents, growers, commodity group leaders, industry suppliers, and consumers."

What Poling has described in my mind is an informal "participatory group." I'm also surprised that he supports the so-called "expert / student" model for extension work. I doubt that he views himself as the "all-knowing" expert. I suspect that he interacts with growers as co-learners, working and learning together. This type of interaction is quite effective, as Poling demonstrates in his article on advances in strawberry culture. Unfortunately, it is becoming increasingly rare for a faculty member at a land-grant university in the United States to have this type of relationship with the agricultural community. Therefore, I have recommended a more-formal mechanism (or at least a discussion of the problem) to strengthen the critical ties between land-grant faculty and members of the agricultural community. The important feature of both the formal and informal participatory process is mutual respect and communication.

While there are other aspects of PR&E that might be discussed, respect for the knowledge, experience, and expectations of growers, industry representatives, and the consuming public is a necessary beginning. Poling clearly demonstrates his understanding of the basic need to work in partnership with growers and others, even though he rejects the "label" of PR&E. It is my experience that the number of university faculty who understand the need to listen and learn from growers and others is dwindling. The organization and culture of the modern university discourages faculty from creating and maintaining the kind of respectful interaction with those outside of the science community that is the foundation of PR&E. A comparison between the "expert / student" model and "co-learner" model in which scientists work in partnership with growers and others might improve our understanding of this problem. I think Poling would see many commonalities between the concept of PR&E and his daily activities if he studied the PR&E literature.

A useful introduction to the PR&E literature might be the proceedings of a conference on Participatory On-farm Research and Education for Agricultural Sustainability, held at the Univ. of Illinois on 30 July–1 Aug. 1992. This proceedings includes articles on the conceptual foundation and the practice of PR&E in U.S. agriculture. It is available for a small cost from the Univ. of Illinois Agricultural Experiment Station, 211 Mumford Hall, 1301 W. Gregory Dr., Urbana, IL 61801 (phone 217 / 333-0240 for information on the proceedings and video of the conference). I've already sent a complementary copy of the proceedings to my friend, Barclay Poling.

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## Poling responds

The North Carolina strawberry plasticulture story is real, and it *did not* come about through participative goal-setting. A *market-related*, goal-setting process (explained in my article) is responsible for this success story. In 1994, we have achieved near-perfect *alignment* between strawberry research and industry plasticulture interests in this state. The market-related research goals that I set in the early 1980s have led to a total cessation of research projects on matted row, the former system of strawberry culture in North Carolina.

As scientists, we are obligated to look at the data, including program impacts, before we reach our conclusion(s). Participative approaches may not be a panacea. Gerber's participative approach imperative needs feedback from others besides myself.

I recognize the "unusualness" of my program, and I am not in a position to offer prescriptions for other land-grant extension specialists to follow. That was not the goal of my article. I do spend a lot of time on the industry "front line," and, possibly at times, I work in the mode of "an informal participative specialist," and Gerber suggests.

North Carolina State Univ. research and extension is fully responsible for plasticulture coming to North Carolina, and this is something that I am very happy to trumpet my horn about. And, what an incredible payoff a very modest investment has provided us in terms of a more "competitive-feeling" industry that is now generating some $7 million in direct market sales of strawberries. Consumers are happier, and kids (including my own) are eating naturally sweet (and properly ripened) fresh strawberries after school instead of junk food. Plasticulture strawberries are also becoming a legitimate horticultural-crop alternative for numerous tobacco farmers throughout our state.

It doesn't stop there, as we are truly becoming a regional and national resource center for strawberry plasticulture information. My out-of-

state calls exceed my in-state calls on strawberries. I have no problem with this, as other states and their land-grant scientists have helped us immeasurably in the past. Its all part of being a good land-grant scientist and educator.

In closing, I would like to say that it is a joy to have the full force of a research organization behind your extension program. I don't believe that land-grant scientists are trying to duck real-world problems. In fact, I am constantly soliciting their ideas and advice to help us with that very tough-to-make-a-living farming world out there. They (the experts) want to see the North Carolina farmer be more successful, and they truly wish to contribute. It is my job to help channel that flow of expertise into areas where it can do the most good for the strawberry farmer.

# One More Perspective on "A Blueberry by Any Other Name..."

**James F. Hancock[1] and Barbara Goulart[2]**

At the risk of starting a chain of letters, we would like to respond to some of the criticisms made by Ehlenfeldt and Vorsa (*HortTechnology* 3:465–466) on our recent article in the Readers' Forum.

First, we appreciate their minor corrections in our table of species compositions. It is indeed more likely that pentaploids contribute genes from the two progenitor species proportionally rather than equally. As they indicate, however, "these corrections do little to alter the total sense of our original table." We were surprised that Ehlenfeldt didn't alert us earlier to our computational errors, since he reviewed a rough draft of our manuscript.

Second, the suggestion that blueberries are similar to cultivated *Brassica* is a bit stretched. Cauliflower, broccoli, brussels sprouts, and cabbage are very different crops and, in most of these, different parts of the plant are eaten. In contrast, all blueberry fruit look the same and originate from the same plant part. Only one species, *Brassica oleracea*, was used in the development of the various cole crops, while the different types of blueberries had distinct origins that are now being blurred through introgression. They are not analogous situations.

Finally, Ehlenfeldt and Vorsa suggest that the proper definition of wild is "…not the product of selective breeding." We suggest that all plants that are cultivated cannot be considered wild, regardless of whether they are naturally seeded or not. One can argue the relative merits of these two definitions *ad nauseam*, but it still seems to us that lowbush plants that are "irrigated, fertilized, mowed, burned, and sprayed" cannot be considered wild with a clear conscience. Certainly, it has not occurred to anyone to call fruit from the highbush cultivar Rubel wild, even though it was a gift from nature and not bred by anyone.

We agree with Ehlenfeldt and Vorsa's contention that "…we should retain descriptors if they are useful," and "rabbiteye" have played an important role and are still "useful," but the day is rapidly approaching when they will lose their utility. Modern breeders are fast blurring the distinctions between the major types of blueberries.

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