It’s a Wrap: The Final Column

It has been fun writing these thirteen columns—and a challenge. For those of you who read them—thanks, and I hope you gained something. In some ways, it has been reminiscent of grammar school—with the adrenaline rush of having to make deadlines for turning in papers to my 8th grade English teacher, Mrs. Wyckoff. She was a superb teacher dealing with VERY challenged students—our spelling was so poor that we ruined hers! I am sure she would be turning over in her grave if she knew what I try and do for a living. So, there is hope for anyone! And thanks to Mike Neff and Sylvia DeMar for putting up with my columns—down to the wire! Below is a synopsis.

In the Beginning—and Good Things Happening at ASHS

As a young graduate traveling the world after college, I became hooked on horticulture and plant physiology, and saw a niche of opportunities in international agriculture. I still use some of those international experiences when I teach and do research. And I have been fortunate to have since worked on Fulbright Fellowships, teaching and doing research in Mexico and Peru. With globalization, the niche of opportunities for high-value horticultural crops are as prevalent as ever! Even the NASA-sponsored low-pressure production systems we study in our lab are based around salad bowl crops. There will be no long-term habitation on the Moon or Mars without Horticulture! And it’s not just human nutrition, but how horticulture impacts all of us in the quality, psychology, and value-added aspects of our lives.

Today, horticulture and ASHS stand at a crossroad that offers much opportunity. While Land Grant Horticultural Departments are contracting into Plant Science Depts., more horticulture is being taught than ever in non-traditional Land Grant universities, colleges, and technical schools. Globalization, marketing, labor, environmental issues, energy and water-usage issues and consolidation are having a profound affect on the viability and profit margins of the horticultural industries. ASHS has the continual challenge of reinventing and positioning itself to be more attuned to a smaller, but viable, membership base, and to reach out, attract, and become more relevant to industry, students, faculty, and the public.

The Farm Bill with the Specialty Crop Research Initiative and Specialty Crop Block Grants program are a real opportunity for the discipline of Horticulture and ASHS. The move of ASHS to hire a national issues consultant and the development of the National Issues Task Force (NITF) by John Clark and Thomas Björkman to make ASHS more proactive as an organization is vital. The downsizing and enhanced efficiency of ASHS Headquarters staff and the development and better utilization of web-based technology greatly enhance ASHS capabilities.

Reaching Out: Opportunities with ASHS Professional Certification Programs

How can ASHS be more effective in helping industry find and employ qualified horticulturists? How can we better enhance the professionalism and development of horticulturists enrolled at 2- and 4-year institutions, and at Land Grant universities where “Horticulture” has become embedded in “Plant Science” Departments? In other careers, certification is a prerequisite for employment—e.g., medicine, accounting, automotive repair, pesticide application, arboriculture. While Horticulture is ubiquitous in our daily lives, it gets lost between the cracks in public recognition and appreciation. Even our industry has trouble differentiating between the professional ASHS and the more public AHS (American Horticultural Society); e.g., Home Depot initially sought the help of AHS, rather than ASHS, in starting its own nursery certification program.

Certification and forming strategic alliances with industry—The development of the ASHS Certified Horticulturist program is also an opportunity to bridge with industry and make ASHS more relevant to horticultural professionals. While initially targeting the industry practitioner, self-sustaining certification programs also have great opportunities in assessment of university and community colleges teaching horticulture, and in attracting and serving non-Land Grant horticulturists. It has been a pleasure to chair this group for the past six years. There has been tremendous volunteerism, vision, and contributions given by ASHS colleagues and industry participants in developing the program—and much work still needs to be done. There is no organization better positioned than ASHS to raise the professional bar of Horticulture for industry, students, and the public.

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It Happened in Lisbon: Forces Affecting International Horticulture

The International Horticultural Congress (IHC) reinforced just how global Horticulture has become in a dynamic, complex, and challenging environment—where “old school” just doesn’t cut it anymore. Some important themes, relevant to all of us in Horticulture, were addressed.

Norm Looney chaired the opening colloquium, which dealt with meeting an ever-increasing global demand for food, with a finite land resource and an increasingly problematic production environment, that will require both the ingenuity of science and a richly stocked storehouse of genetic resources. Horticultural scientists and educators harbor a deep concern about the issues of hunger and rural poverty identified by the UN Millennium Development Goals and they recognize that horticultural science and industry can contribute importantly to improving both health and livelihoods of the world’s poor.

Jelger de Vriend (Innovative Fresh B.V.) gave a talk on “Revolutionizing Horticulture Research in a Consumer Oriented World.” He talked about Darwinism in the supermarket system, and the rapid development of retail in emerging markets—which he called akin to retail “on steroids.” Some 80% of European fresh produce (fruits, vegetable) is sold through supermarkets, with two to three chains dominating. The larger retailers have become self-distributing, performing wholesale activities such as purchasing produce directly from suppliers and arranging for shipment to distribution warehouses. The global fresh fruit and vegetable marketing system is increasingly focused on adding value and decreasing costs by streamlining shipping and understanding customer demands. All of this is having a major effect on the horticulture supply chain. Sounds like Wal-Mart, which is the #1 supermarket in United States.

Retailers are a very efficient gateway to consumers, and are now dictating to consumers and producers. Jelger queried if there were any retailers in the IHC audience: there were none. His point was that horticulturists, researchers, and extension need to better bridge with retailers. The pace of applied research needs to speed up to keep up with the rapid changes in industry and marketing. The Catch-22 is that there are fewer applied horticulturists to do the research and extension, and we have not done a good job of generating funding support from producers and the retail sector.

Ian Warrington remarked on horticulture being an im-
important contributor to the world economy. Horticulture is an enabler of employment in rural and urban sectors. Fruits and vegetables are primary contributors of essential vitamins and minerals to the human diet—much more so than agronomic crops. With the urbanization of populations, there is a general ignorance of the public toward horticulture and agriculture. We all have a long way to go in educating the public and legislative powers about Horticulture. More importantly, we need to stop thinking about just “horticultural crops” and focus more on how horticulture can be “part of the solution” in fighting obesity, enhancing human health and nutrition, improving the quality of life.

**Food Miles, CSA, Slow Food, Agriburbia, Permaculture—and Horticulture**

Change is afoot about how we view the quality, nutrition, production, origin, and safety of foods we consume. The average supermarket item is transported over 1200 miles from farm to fork. This is an unsustainable system based on petroleum. Some 40% of America’s sedentary youth and a higher proportion of adults are obese—due in part to poor dietary choices (insufficient horticultural products) and lack of exercise. This is a huge public health problem. Urban encroachment continues to take out prime farmland. While farm producers are fewer and older, there are some important changes happening. In California, the fastest growing segment of farmers are female, non-Anglo, and intensively farming small acreage with horticultural crops.

Even Wal-Mart has picked up on leveraging “Food Miles”. Wal-Mart has long focused on cost-saving efficiency and was an early adopter of food miles as a profit-maximizing strategy. The company has embraced the environmental benefits of supply chain efficiency.

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) has become a popular way for consumers to buy local, seasonal, FRESH food directly from a farmer. By supporting local foods, local farms, and farmers, one helps build the local economy, while reducing the food miles and fossil fuel consumption it takes to get a nutritious, tasty meal on your table. Another caveat is it helps preserve a vital national security asset—farmland, plus it helps keep urban and industrial sprawl in check. Napoleon knew the importance of self-sufficiency and that an army travels on its belly—something that some of our current Washington, D.C., policy makers have yet to fully grasp.

All these changes afoot are opportunities for new Horticulture ventures. In Machiavelli’s *The Prince*: the hardest thing for an organization to do is to change—some people lose, some gain—but most important is what is best for the organization; “he who neglects what is done for what ought to be done, sooner affects his ruin than his preservation.” In Horticulture and ASHS there are new strategic opportunities for horticulture production, research, teaching and extension outreach—are we willing to seize the moment and adapt to these opportunities?

**Winter Storms, Super Bowls, and the Importance of ASHS Regional Meetings**

*ASHS is about relationships*—One of the most important reasons we become and remain members of ASHS is because of relationships. It is these personal relationships and long-term friendships we develop and retain over the years that keeps bringing us back. The professional interaction, networking, and collaboration opportunities that occur are invaluable for our careers in Horticulture. ASHS is also about collegiality.

*ASHS is about volunteering*—Regional and national ASHS meetings only work because of the tremendous amount of time that all the volunteers and elected officers give in planning and making these meetings go. What makes ASHS successful is the enthusiasm, networking—presenting programs on cutting-edge topics, graduate and undergraduate student and club participation. But there is a pretty good reward system for ASHS volunteers: the personal satisfaction and professional friendships gained.

*ASHS is about leadership*—ASHS is a great vehicle for developing leadership. For undergrads there is the Association of Collegiate Branches (ACB). There is a lot of club activity, student competition, and student social activities. New leadership talent is developed each year. The opportunities are plentiful for undergrads, grad students, and young and old faculty to get involved with leadership positions from committees to working groups to serving on the Board of Directors at the regional and national level. For a young faculty member, ASHS is a great reservoir for building a tenure and promotion package that demonstrates teaching, research, extension and leadership capabilities.

**Horticulture: Alive, Well, and Critical for the Developing World**

The recent commitment of ASHS for open access to previous ASHS publications (three years after publication) will be incredibly useful for the developing world, where it is too costly to purchase journals. Several years ago, ASHS also established the ICA (International Colleague Affiliate) membership. For $20/year any ASHS Member can sponsor an international colleague (for up to three years) from the
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developing world, as defined by the World Bank, to receive current electronic access to all three ASHS serial publications and the ASHS Newsletter. First-time members may also sponsor themselves.

There are many opportunities for ASHS members to get involved internationally. Diane Miller, ASHS International Division Vice President, and John Griffis, Chair, International Horticultural Consultants Working Group, have done an excellent job of disseminating international opportunities in the ASHS Newsletter. Many of our ASHS Members have also done Fulbrights and other international programs—which is a win-win for the participants and students, faculty and horticulturists in the developing world. It is really important that we encourage more of our young people in horticulture and agriculture to get out of their comfort zones and get involved internationally. Companies and international agencies are looking for students who have worked and studied abroad. They are far more likely to speak another language, have a greater appreciation of world culture, and are more adaptable and better employees.

The Capitol Hill Connection: Importance for Horticulture and ASHS

Each spring the ASHS Board of Directors makes their annual all-day pilgrimage to Capitol Hill to meet with Representatives, key Ag committee members, and congressional and senatorial staff members. This year we also met with USDA Undersecretary for Research, Catherine Woteki, and National Institute for Food and Agriculture (NIFA) Director, Roger Beachy, to promote the needs of Horticulture. These meetings are invaluable for conveying our accomplishments—both current and past. I feel very confident with the direction ASHS has been taking, with the leadership and input from ASHS members. I have appreciated the leadership of the current Board of Directors, including Chair, Bill Lamont, and look forward to the upcoming Presidency of Dewayne Ingram. I am not going to sugar coat it. We face significant challenges, but new opportunities occur with change. Horticulture is ubiquitous—and a great, noble profession and translational discipline. Humankind needs us to flourish and survive. Keep in touch!

We will need success stories—As Jonathan writes, the NITF needs membership help with descriptions of trans-disciplinary research with clear and concise objectives, including definable dividends for the general public, that resonate with Congress and their constituents. It is horticultural research’s best defense for maintaining a viable foothold within USDA’s budget. “Show us tangible benefits of Hort research” is what Congress will be looking for in this era of shrinking budgets. ASHS success stories will keep horticulture’s message prominent within the halls of Congress.

Final Wrap

It has been an honor, humbling, and a privilege to serve as your President. I have had some very large shoes to fill from my predecessors—both current and past. I feel very confident with the direction ASHS has been taking, with the leadership and input from ASHS members. I have appreciated the leadership of the current Board of Directors, including Chair, Bill Lamont, and look forward to the upcoming Presidency of Dewayne Ingram. I am not going to sugar coat it. We face significant challenges, but new opportunities occur with change. Horticulture is ubiquitous—and a great, noble profession and translational discipline. Humankind needs us to flourish and survive. Keep in touch!

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New Certified Horticulturist

ASHS is pleased to announce that Debbie Hughes has successfully fulfilled the requirements and passed the examination to be named an ASHS Certified Horticulturist.

Debbie Hughes graduated with a BS in Biology from Augustana College in 1980, a BS in Physical Therapy from Northwestern University in 1982, and a MS in Exercise Physiology from Eastern Illinois University in 1984.

Hughes decided to do therapy on plants instead of people and became a Master Gardener in 1996 through the Lee County Extension Service in Florida. “I continued to study horticulture through continuing education credits offered through University of Florida and Florida Nursery Growers and Landscape Association,” she adds. She has served as President of the Fort Myers-Lee County Garden Council, a certified Horticulturist through Florida Nursery Growers and Landscape Association (FNGLA), a member of several plant societies, and appointed to the Roadway Landscape Advisory Committee in Lee County. She is the horticulturist at the Edison & Ford Winter Estates in Fort Myers, FL, 13 acres of a historical landscape and museum dedicated to Thomas Edison and Henry Ford who spent winters in the early 1900s.

For additional information about this program, including the upcoming examination schedule, contact Dawn Mancini, dmancini@ashs.org; 703.836.4606, ext. 113.