

FLORICULTURE'S FUTURE - THE UNIVERSITY AND INDUSTRY

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The following article was adapted from Allen's Keynote address given at the Short Course earlier this month.

Of all the topics one could talk about - I was assigned this one as the keynote address. I have always thought a keynote address should be very positive and uplifting. Sort of like a pep talk before the big game or a new campaign to accomplish something great. But, I find the topic "Floriculture's Future - The University and Industry" very disturbing. It is going to be extremely difficult for me to be positive and uplifting because I have some major concerns for our future.

In my Sunday school class we have been studying story telling as a learning tool. It seems like a very good way to learn and one that we use often without realizing it. So I am going to start with a story.

Once upon a time there was a young boy in a small North Carolina town. It was time before man had walked on the moon, before we had computers, or before plugs or plastic flats or seed geraniums. But it was a good time, a positive time. This young man did not live on a farm or

in a greenhouse family. But he had an interest in plants. So as a freshman in high school he signed up for FFA. Agriculture wasn't a subject for the college bound student. Algebra, English, and science were much more important. However, this student persisted and was able to stay in the vocational agriculture class. And something very important happened. The vocational agriculture teacher recognized the interest this young boy had in plants and he nurtured and developed this interest. He encouraged it by providing reading materials, suggesting special projects, and even hiring him to work around his house on his horticultural projects. He also encouraged this student to apply for college at North Carolina State University in horticulture science. This young man was accepted at N.C. State and with the help of a garden club scholarship he was able to attend the University. It was a grand experience. The young man was able to learn and expand his thinking. And to develop entirely new ways of approaching life

and living things. And again something very important happened in this young man's life. Drs. Roy Larson, Joe Love, Fred Cochran, and others in the horticulture department provided extra help and encouragement. They provided an opportunity to not only study horticulture but to work in their research programs. Annual bedding plant trials, azaleas, poinsettias, chrysanthemums and a multitude of other plants were studied. Through this experience this young student developed a research interest that was recognized and encouraged. Dr. Larson encouraged the student to consider graduate school at Cornell University. Again, the young student applied and was accepted at Cornell with a graduate assistantship that supported his education. Without the graduate assistantship support, this student would not have been able to attend graduate school. Again, this young man was exposed to some outstanding Professors of floriculture. Drs. Bob Langhans, Jim Boodley, John Seeley provided outstanding guidance. Over an acre of greenhouse space, modern growth chambers, coolers and laboratories were devoted solely to floriculture research. Conferences and grower days attracted growers from around the region to see first hand what was new. It was a time that newsletters from state universities reported exciting new research results. It was also a time that most research support came from federal and state funds. Professors and students spent their time studying and doing research.

After graduating from Cornell with a Ph.D. in floriculture this young man became an assistant professor of floriculture at a Mid-Western University. The year was 1973. An extension/research appointment provided an excellent opportunity to continue research and provide assistance to the floriculture industry. With the position came a graduate assistantship, research funding support, and an extension budget without travel or publication limits. Later a technician position was provided by the university. A newsletter was developed and mailed to every greenhouse in the state. Franking privilege was

used for mail cost. And then in the early eighties things began to change. Travel limits were imposed by setting a budget ceiling and franking privileges were no longer available. Publication costs were controlled by charging a user fee. Research funds from federal and state were no longer available for supplies and expenses. And now part of the technicians salary needed to come from grant funds (soft funding). The number of faculty with horticulture training began to decline because as retirements occurred, the positions were either not filled or were redefined to take advantage of the new funding available in the biotechnology area. And as the horticulture faculty was reduced, many of the responsibilities of those professors were transferred to the remaining faculty.

I have used this story to develop a picture of how I see the university and industry evolving over the last 30 years. I strongly believe the floriculture industry developed to the extent it did in those past years because of floriculture education and research at our land grant universities. I support change when it is planned and done with purpose. However, now much of the change I see at our universities is certainly not being done to improve floriculture. I find we are in general responding to things instead of planning for the future.

The loss of floriculture faculty is serious. I hear some suggesting that industry consultants will handle the extension. That is possible in the short run, but who is going to train new consultants. Our university system of extension, research and teaching is the best in the world. We have extremely dedicated faculty at our universities. The system is not being destroyed because of floriculture faculty. It is coming from policy changes.

Floriculture faculty at universities have been reluctant to take credit for much they have done. We have been trained to do our job in a somewhat low key. What would the greenhouse azalea be without Roy Larson's research? I think that question is easy to answer. But you have not

heard Roy standing before you and taking a lot of credit. Or how many times has Joe Love or Roy Larson answered a production question that made the difference between a saleable or unsaleable crop? Floriculture faculty have not answered those questions seeking credit. They have answered them because it was their job and they had a real concern for the industry.

Times are changing and I believe we will continue to see major changes at universities. I am not sure what the future industry - university relationships will be. I do think it is extremely important for the floriculture industry to be active at both the state and national level. It is extremely important that industry support your university. I will promise you, if the university administration does not see an industry interest in the university we will continue to lose faculty and support. And without the university, education and research will greatly suffer. This industry can survive without extension, but it can not without education and research.

The story about the young man started in 1959--32 years ago. What we are losing at our universities in 1992 may not be fully realized until 2022. It is difficult to worry about 2022 when faced with the day to day business problems. However, I do think it is important to develop a future for your sons and daughters. The best thing we can every do for any industry is provide a

vision for the future. If the future looks bright it is much easier to motivate everyone to do their best.

I believe our goal as a nation to land a "man" on the moon in the 60's and 70's provided incentive for us as a society. We had a goal. And it was very apparent to me that each of us had a feeling we were part of that goal. Do we have a national goal at present? Have either of the presidential candidates suggested a national goal - something we can all get behind and work toward?

I would encourage you to realize the changes occurring at the universities. Floriculture faculty are faced with different pressures today than in previous years. There are fewer faculty in a world of high technology requiring greater expertise. Your support and encouragement are extremely important.

Floriculture does have a future. The growth in this industry is very real. The potential for future growth is very exciting. I believe that growth depends upon a strong university - industry relationship. Do not give up on the university. Do not give up on your future. Become involved. Every single voice does count.

I really appreciate the opportunity to be with you. North Carolina is very special. Your industry is outstanding. You are important to the future of floriculture.
