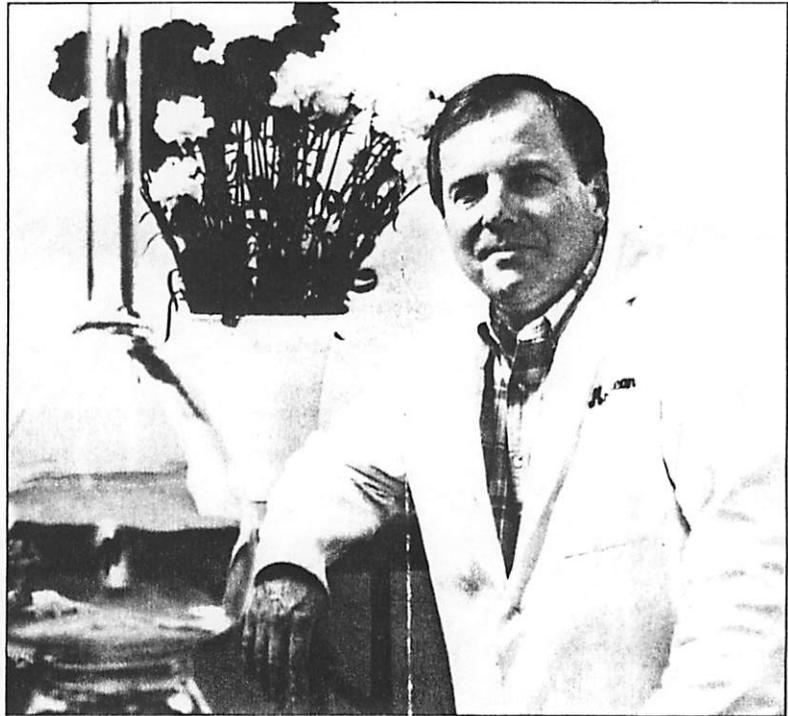


# Handle With Care



George Staby, Connecticut

By Jean Adamczak

Dr. George Staby, Connecticut, may be the most misunderstood person in the floral industry. Basically, his full-time career is devoted to educating industry members about the proper postharvest care and handling of floral products. A self-described family man, he's also a devoted volunteer firefighter and an emergency medical technician. His life revolves around three things: family, fighting fires, and the floral industry. And AGR is a part of his extended family. In fact he's just signed on as AGR's Regional Vice President - Pacific region having held that position from 1989 - 1992.

Yet some in his own industry perceive him as "the enemy." A stubborn, industry know-it-all with an ego the size of California and a temper to match. The reality is that Staby is one of the industry's prominent experts in the field of care and handling, and besides, under his apparently rough exterior beats the heart of a generous, caring man. Someone who never lets you down, whether you need a workshop leader or someone to make a "short notice" visit to a local chapter. A man whose blue eyes get teary and whose voice gets husky with emotion recalling the death of a 27-year-old fellow firefighter.

"I was sitting in my office and my pager went off," Staby recounted. "There was a

vehicle accident at Graton Road and Sullivan which is practically at the end of my driveway, so I was there in a minute. There were cars all around and all of a sudden I hear this voice: 'Hey, George!' I look over in a ditch and there's this guy all covered with mud.

"I said, 'Who are you?' and he said, 'Danny'. A fireman in my unit. He was riding his bike, he got hit by the car, and he died. He died an hour later."

Compounding the tragedy of Danny's death was the fact that only two days before, Staby had chewed out the young firefighter at the scene of another accident. Danny hadn't responded quickly enough to Captain Staby's orders and was on the receiving end of Staby's wrath.

"My patience is about that long," Staby said, indicating a space of about one-half inch between his thumb and index finger. "Whoever is with me on a call, they better know what they're doing. I had so many things on my mind that day. I had people laying all over the place and something wasn't being done right and I screamed at Danny. Later on, he apologized to me and I apologized to him."

Such blow-ups aren't uncommon with Staby and are partially to blame for his "bad boy" image.

Ironically, the reasons some people view the care-and-handling guru in a less-than-

friendly light are the same attributes that have enabled him to excel in his field. Attention to detail and the ability to see everything analytically are two such traits.

"I've been referred to as having a black-or-white mind," Staby confessed. "I don't see gray, which is another personality fault or advantage of mine, but when you do research like I do, you have to be analytical."

His aptitude for diagnosing problems and devising solutions is evident whether he's conducting research in the lab or aiding a seriously injured accident victim. In either case, Staby puts his heart and soul into the task and expects those around him to do the same. He realizes he's a little "rough around the edges."

"I'm the type of person that if everybody wants to go in one direction, I'll just sort of want to go in the opposite direction," Staby said, trying to explain his notoriety. "I'm a little rough, but I say it the way it is."

## Self-Employed

The way it is now, Staby is happily self-employed as the president of Perishables Research Organization, a research and consulting firm specializing in postharvest storage, handling and marketing of fruit, vegetable, floral and nursery products. Staby founded the company in 1983.



Family, fighting fires and the floral industry are the priorities in George Staby's life. Kathy, his wife of more than 25 years, and Clem, their dog, get cozy with the AGR volunteer on the front porch of the Staby home.



Brother Staby is very proud of being a volunteer firefighter and emergency medical technician. He also teaches classes in emergency medical training at a community college.

"I've always loved plants, I guess," the 50 year-old remarked. "Except for my father's generation, the Staby family, as far as we know, has always been in agriculture. My brother and I continued that tradition. He went into forestry and I went into horticulture."

He married Kathy, his wife, when he was 22.

Armed with a bachelor's degree in plant science from the University of Connecticut, Staby and his wife left the East Coast for the Midwest. They lived in Michigan while he completed a master's degree and a doctorate in horticulture from Michigan State. "That's when I fell in love with the postharvest side of things," Staby explained. He continued to pursue postharvest work while teaching and conducting research at The Ohio State University from 1970 to 1982.

"I had the best job in the world at Ohio State," Staby reflected. "I wouldn't have left a tenured position at the time if I'd known that in six months I'd be thinking about self-employment."

But leave he did, moving his wife and two sons (son Greg is a California-Davis AGR) across the country to take a job with a company that offered some nice perks and promised to pay three times what Staby was making at OSU. He got the big

salary - for a year - and then left the company. The result was Perishables Research Organization.

### Home away from Home

He runs the company out of an office and lab facility added to his home three years ago. Home for Staby and his wife is a sprawling, two-story house located on 2.5 acres in Sonoma County about 60 miles north of San Francisco. Vineyards and apple orchards surround the Staby homestead, which boasts 61 fruit trees, 21 grapevines and one very large, old, friendly dog named Clem.

The 528-square-foot lab/office was actually added to Staby's garage.

Staby's home away from home is his office, located right off the lab. Here things are a bit cozier, with a large window that looks out on the wooded hills behind Staby's house.

Hanging on the wall next to Staby's desk is a portrait of his father clad in regulation fire department dress uniform. A wooden plaque honoring the younger Staby as "Firefighter of the Year 1991" from the Graton Fire Protection District is displayed on another wall.

### On Call

Recently, Staby's pager for the fire sta-

tion went off at 3:00 a.m. It was a "public assist" call, which means somebody has fallen or otherwise been injured and needs help. Staby faithfully responded to the address given and ended up helping an elderly priest who had fallen out of bed.

"That call turned out to be more rewarding than 20 structure fires," Staby said earnestly. "There are the gory stories, the traumatic rescues, the bloody accidents that people remember. But to me, helping that priest who fell out of bed was just as important and rewarding to me as any of those other calls."

It seems perfectly natural that someone so concerned with helping others and preserving lives would dedicate his full-time career to extending the longevity of a perishable product like cut flowers — and the development of young agricultural leaders. Under Staby's confident, sometimes smug exterior is a kind, intelligent, genuinely nice man who would do practically anything to ensure another human being's survival. Handle him with care. AGR

*Editor's Note: Brother Staby is the sponsor of two \$500 scholarships given annually to AGRs studying Horticulture. Applications, due May 15, can be obtained by calling the Home Office at 816-891-9200.*