



Promising Trends For The Future Of Floriculture Education And Extension

by NEIL S. MATTSON, BRIAN KRUG and ROBERTO G. LOPEZ

THE role of Extension research and education in floriculture is dramatically changing in the U.S. due to economic necessity. There has been a dramatic decline in resources from county, state and federal sources to support Extension activities, which has led to a decline in the number of individuals working in floriculture Extension. As we look back, the three of us were the last floriculture Extension specialists to be hired since 2007.

Today, Extension personnel get very little program support (dedicated funds for Extension travel, applied research and so on) and must be creative to both support their own Extension activities and remain relevant to industry needs. Industry funding is becoming increasingly important. We will also need the industry to continue to advocate for our funding from public sources.

The Silver Lining

In light of these changes, some promising future trends are evident. Extension personnel are collaborating at an unprecedented level across state lines and this will continue even further through entities like the Floriculture Sustainability Research Coalition, established in 2008.

Many states no longer have a greenhouse production specialist or a well-rounded team of entomologists, plant pathologists and other scientists to work with. Therefore, many of us have formed informal multi-state teams to address issues. There are several great examples of this collaboration. The award-winning (ASHS Outstanding Extension Website Award) e-Gro.org and e-GRO Alert are prime examples as more than 1,800 growers from across the U.S. and numerous countries have signed up in the past year. Now, more than a dozen specialists from around the country are involved in the project with the support of the Fred C. Gloeckner Foundation and the American Floral Endowment. The FloriCAST podcasts and Basics and Beyond grower columns, brought to you by *Greenhouse Grower*, are other examples of how Extension

personnel from six different states are working together to bring information to growers. The GrowCALC online calculators are a direct result of three universities combining their expertise to assist growers. The New England states banded together years ago to produce the New England Floriculture Pest Guide.

Dr. Paul Fisher and others at the University of Florida have brought Extension researchers together with industry collaborators over the past several years through the Young Plant Research Center and the Water Research Alliance for Horticulture. All of these efforts perfectly illustrate both the importance and the benefits of cooperation between academia and the industry.

Embracing Technology

While hands-on training sessions are extremely helpful to industry members, this may also require a pay-to-play system or, alternatively, specialists being successful in receiving external funding to pay for a particular program. For example, we have been successful in receiving grants from the USDA Specialty Crop Block Grants Program and the New York Farm Viability Institute for educational diagnostic sessions and IPM In-Depth hands-on sessions in Indiana, New Hampshire

and New York. Workshops were held throughout the far reaches of each state. Participants received training in pest and disease identification, PGRs, environmental and cultural management and substrate testing.

With the evolution of technology, it is less important to get your information from a local source. Decreasing travel budgets mean that Extension personnel are increasingly turning to distance education to reach their audiences, including websites with fact sheets, pictures of the week, webinars, online training, eBooks, certificate programs and so on.

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YEARS OF EXCELLENCE

Education

In the future, we envision software advances that may enable distance learning to use a more interactive format rather than simply listening to a webinar or reading a fact sheet. This may take the form of growers learning techniques with virtual plants as part of a software program and then practicing with their own plants while Extension personnel watch and guide attendees remotely.

In terms of troubleshooting problems, mobile apps, diagnosis from photos and eMail conversations with Extension specialists are now commonly used. In the future, we may increasingly use Skype or Google Hangouts to try to solve problems remotely and site visits may necessitate a fee for travel costs. We don't anticipate technology will become a complete substitute for face-to-face visits with greenhouse operations, as it can be difficult to troubleshoot a problem that is the result of several interacting factors within a production system. We do feel that video can enhance a phone conversation by virtually being in a greenhouse.

A positive benefit of distance education is that we are able to connect with many geographically distant operations at one time, reaching a critical mass of online attendees for a presentation. The floriculture industry is fragmented geographically and in terms of crops produced — a presentation on troubleshooting production in a specialized crop may not have a critical mass of attendees in any given state but nationally, dozens of growers

may be interested in the topic and attend a webinar.

The informal groupings of floriculture personnel across state boundaries may eventually give rise to more formal arrangements where universities from multiple states pay to support an Extension specialist or team of specialists. As budgets continue to tighten, private industry is and will continue to fill in these gaps for a fee (or in exchange for purchasing its products).

Looking To The Future

Despite these changes and challenges, this is an exciting time for floriculture Extension. We are working together across state lines and in an interdisciplinary way to serve you. Distance education and technology offer opportunities that never existed before. The greenhouse industry is in constant evolution and so is floriculture Extension. Evolving together will ensure that we all remain relevant in a highly competitive environment.

Going forward, please remember that the importance of industry, association and grower support of floriculture research and Extension programs is more important than ever and no donation is too small.

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