

Here, There, and Back Again Again!

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Summary

Historically, individuals from the private sector of Horticulture/ Green Industry and those from the academic side have divergent backgrounds and experiences. Some academics have little or no commercial horticultural exposure. This paper highlights

some of the challenges, opportunities and benefits of bridging the gap by employing people in academia with significant experience in private industry - “hybrid” professionals.

INTRODUCTION

I was raised by 3rd generation horticulturists on a retail nursery in deep east Texas. This upbringing shaped me in every conceivable way, but one thing that stands out from my childhood is the appreciation my parents and grandparents had for tangible results. This appreciation naturally led to a disdain

for practices that were of questionable effectiveness. Fast forward 20 years from that little boy on the farm in Tenaha, Texas to a young man entering graduate school at Texas A&M University in College Station, Texas where I began to learn new ways of thinking about the challenges that faced the

horticulture industry. I appreciated the newfound scope of work that I was able to take part in, as Texas A&M is the land grant University in Texas - and our stakeholders included the whole of the Texas green industry. However, I found myself missing the practicality with which my family had operated for generations. This juxtaposition became common fodder for my inner dialogue and many conversations with close friends and colleagues. The following is my effort to harmonize the world of academia and private industry and to display

how beneficial it can be for individuals with interest in both realms - bridge this gap.

History Of King's Nursery

In 1915, J.B. King Sr. began growing strawberries in the sugar sands of east Texas (**Fig. 1**). With no other strawberry growers in the area, he developed a market for them by shipping the produce to Shreveport, Louisiana. Soon the idea became popular with many neighboring farmers, and J.B. realized that he needed to differentiate his farm.



Figure 1. The Kings' strawberry field in Tenaha, Texas in the early 1920s.

He began grafting and growing fruit trees and roses - and the King Nursery was born (**Fig. 2**). His slogan was: "Where the name of the firm indicates the quality of stock." In 1947, J.B. King Jr. was called into service at the nursery. He incorporated more ornamental plants into the nursery's

inventory, until the early 1950s when it became a one-stop shop for retail customers. Even though the nursery has always depended on retail customers, J.B. Jr. had a wholesale sensibility. He was a tremendous propagator and preferred the solitude of plant production to the often-hectic nature of retail sales.



Figure 2. J.B. King, Sr. and Katie King standing in front of the King Nursery sign in the late 1930s.

In 1979, J.B. Jr.'s son, Aubrey King, began full-time work on the nursery. Like his father, he was an excellent plantsman; however, he was also highly skilled in the art of sales. Treating customers as students, he would spend hours with those who showed interest in horticulture. He placed his signature on the nursery by offering cutting-edge plant material, especially in the area of perennials and small trees.

In January of 2021, I took over as President and Operator of King's Nursery. It has been an incredible three years and most importantly my horticultural abilities have increased exponentially.

Obstacles To Practical Academic Horticultural Science

I was academically trained by some of the best horticulturists I know. Drs. David

Creech (**Fig. 3**) and Mike Arnold are each fantastic in their own right and have conducted research that has influenced the plant production industry. I am grateful for these mentors. As I became more acquainted with the lay of the proverbial academic landscape - I realized that this was less common than I had assumed. A number of obstacles make it more difficult than it should be to conduct meaningful horticultural research that meets the needs of the industry that so many of us strive to serve.

First and most problematic: lack of funding is an issue. Genuinely relevant and needed research may not lead to a windfall for majority members of the industry and this often disincentivizes them from financially supporting these efforts.



Figure 3. Dr. David Creech of Stephen F. Austin University - outstanding in his field!

Historically, the Green Industry has underfunded applied research compared to other industries. The findings of needed research can lead to massive improvements in how the industry grows crops, what crops we can actually grow - and for the end-consumer it can mean success in their landscape. Long-term “trial and error” documented by research leading to successful landscapes results in more satisfied customers who will spend more money buying plants - increasing wholesalers’ and retailers’ bottom line. The problem is that this is a long-game model requiring patience. Many are unwilling to play the game. The academic is increasingly judged based on the amount of research dollars that are garnered by their program – and subsequent publication record.

Hence, many good scientists pass on needed research that is relevant - simply because it is underfunded and will not further their career. While not their fault, it is the reality of the academic system.

Second is the old axiom: “publish or perish.” Unfortunately, unintended consequences are heavily weighted toward those scientists favoring short-term research that is quickly publishable versus long-term projects that are potentially industry-shaping; this skewed incentive also leads researchers to shift away from the goal of fulfilling industry needs, for which they were originally hired to do – to research that will allow them to remain employed. All of this may add up to research that the scientist is not passionate about - and of little relevance to the Green Industry.

Clearly, researchers who are members of IPPS-SR are scientists - motivated to help the Green Industry. Many of them fit the aforementioned description of a “hybrid” industry-experienced/academic professional, giving them greater credibility with Green Industry members. Still, there should be even more opportunities for industry-experienced individuals in academia than is currently available. These “hybrid” professionals bring unique perspectives/experiences that can lead to research that is both relevant – and answers future questions that no one is currently asking.

Academia Is Invaluable

I was initially drawn to the world of academia by the allure of teaching. The idea of being influential in the horticultural lives of students as Dr. Creech was in mine, was very appealing. In fact, to this day the professional accomplishments that I am most proud of revolve around students that I have been able to connect with, many of whom are currently becoming leaders in our industry (**Fig. 4**). I am grateful that I was able to teach them horticultural science.



Figure 4. The Kings (3rd - 5th from left) with former students from Texas A&M University.

Without at least some academic training, a horticulturist is generally left without understanding much of the “why” behind the “what” that they do. This is not to say that they cannot be an excellent grower or horticulturist, simply to say that

colleges and universities often focus on training their students more in the science - than the art of horticulture. This scientific background is very useful in the development and understanding of a grower.

Again, the “hybrid” professional can bridge the gap between teaching the art and science of horticulture. One who has experienced planning, scheduling, propagating, growing, marketing, selling and delivering a crop on a consistent basis has a unique perspective for how much science versus art a student should learn.

Industry Experience Is Invaluable Too

Not every member of a horticulture department at a college or university will have experience working in the green industry, nor is that necessary. It is however exceedingly helpful to have people with experience working on your team. This is often accomplished at colleges and universities through industry cooperation, but it should be noted that the “hybrid” member of a department will likely be more available than those co-operators. These members of a team can assist with the direction of future research and give practical advice as to the needs of the industry.

In the past these “hybrid” professionals have been held at arm’s length by the academic world, primarily out of concerns about conflict-of-interest. In certain cases, these are legitimate concerns. There have been and will continue to be individuals that take advantage of positions of trust or authority for personal gain, however the positives of greater academic involvement of industry members outweigh the negatives.

Formal Plant Trials

One example of truly useful work are formal plant trials. These trials allow industry, academia and the public alike to observe how select plant material will fare in a specified locale. For plant growers, this is valu-

able information particularly where new varieties and selections are concerned. Observing a new variety in trial enables a grower to get their initial observation of the plant - *before* trying to commercially grow it. This can prevent unnecessary financial losses for growers. At the same time, the trials can also lead to immediate demand for new varieties since the public can also observe the performance of the plants. This means less lag time for new varieties to become commercially successful with consumers – and growers.

In light of this, SFA Gardens has announced that in June of 2024 they will hold the inaugural Deep East Texas Annual & Perennial Plant Trials (DETAPPT). The goal will be to bring all of the previously-mentioned parties together to disseminate information about new annual and herbaceous perennial crops, to forge new relationships and cooperation amongst stakeholders, and to celebrate the rich horticulture industry that exists in east Texas.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the field of horticulture is stronger when there is a symbiosis of industry and academia - supporting, cooperating and working together. One way to better ensure that this is occurring is to enable more “hybrid” professionals with commercial experience in academia. In the future, these “hybrid” professionals should be sought out for their unique perspectives by academic institutions.