

Propagation in School and Out—Myth and Reality

Fred W. Garrett

P O. Box 1601, Southern Pines, North Carolina 28388

INTRODUCTION

This is indeed a special privilege for me to be surrounded by four of my former students, all graduates of Sandhills Community College, offering a 2-year curriculum in applied horticulture. These former students today represent a total of 49 years of “real world” employment since they graduated. The exposure to propagation from both the theoretical and practical approach will undoubtedly be reflected here today as we discuss the knowledge and experience they received compared to their expectations and actual needs when they graduated to positions involving propagation.

DISCUSSION

Jeff Cred—Speaker One.

Hello, I am Jeff Cred one of three partners of Greensboro Shrub Nursery, Greensboro, North Carolina. I have been in the nursery business for 14 years. Before college the only experience I had came from working with my father in our backyard. We started a small propagation area where we stuck cuttings in cold frames. The high school I attended did not offer any type of horticulture classes; therefore, my interest came from what my father taught me and the little hands-on experience we acquired together.

After making my decision to study plant propagation, I enrolled in the landscape gardening program at Sandhills Community College. I knew everything learned would someday be helpful in my nursery business. There we were shown all aspects of the horticulture business. I feel that college gave me a great foundation to build on, but in no way did I learn everything I needed.

In order to graduate each of us was required to take an apprenticeship in the area we were most interested in. My special interest was in propagation; therefore, I chose Greenleaf Nursery in Oklahoma as I felt it would offer me a wonderful learning experience.

My apprenticeship at Greenleaf Nursery was for 10 weeks. The first 5 weeks I helped load and unload trucks, weed, fertilize, set up plants and spread plants. I did everything there was to do in the field. I then moved to the propagation area where I spent the next 5 weeks. I then learned about propagation in a large nursery. For example, in college we stuck 100+ cuttings at a time, and at Greenleaf I stuck thousands at a time in open beds. I watched how they took care of their cuttings before and after they were stuck. I learned how to set up mist systems and bottom heat systems using hot water. At Greenleaf Nursery I learned how a real nursery operated.

After the apprenticeship I felt I was ready to start my nursery. That was when reality set in. Sandhills and Greenleaf Nursery had only given me the building blocks to begin my work. Not having the perfect propagation means available to

me, I decided to take a combination of both methods, Sandhills and Greenleaf, to set up my propagation greenhouses.

Today we have six greenhouses, with a mist system, bottom heat with hot water in concrete, and a fog system. We rotate two crops a year in these houses. It seems we work on this propagation area a little each day, making small improvements as we go. This year we will propagate well over 500,000 liners in these houses.

Sandhills Community College and Greenleaf Nursery gave me great experience to begin my work. Without it, it would have taken extra years and a great deal more cost to have the nursery we have today. We are very proud of our nursery. There is still a lot we will learn while in the nursery business, but to me, this is the most satisfying job or occupation I could ever want.

John Hoffman—Speaker Two.

I am John Hoffman and am president of Landscapes by Hoffman, Inc. in Rougemont, North Carolina. Our corporation does both nursery and landscape work. I began in the landscaping end of the business before graduating from Sandhills Community College in 1980. I had already graduated from Wayne Community College with a Forestry Degree but could not find any jobs in forestry. I started my career in the landscape business at Goldsboro Nursery in Goldsboro, North Carolina. At Goldsboro Nursery, Martin Casey showed me how the landscape industry really worked and gave me a taste of the nursery business. I was working with plants and realized that this could be the line of work I would like to do for the rest of my life. I realized that I needed to understand more about plant materials and design. Sandhills Community College gave me a good start in learning all the parts of landscaping and a little bit about the nursery end of the business.

I interned with Morris Newlin at New Garden Landscaping and Nursery, here in Greensboro. It was an excellent experience. I made new contacts, learned more about new plant material and learned how to put it all together in a real business situation. I was doing landscape installations from start to finish. Since I had some work experience, I was able to handle my own job designs and sales. Morris was always there to answer my questions. The only regrets I have about my school and intern experiences are that I did not ask enough questions. Looking back now, I wish I had spent more time with Morris at New Garden. You just do not realize what it takes to run a business until you actually own your own business.

I started my business in 1981 after graduation and internship. The real learning begins when you run your own business. I started in Greensboro doing landscape design and installations. I also did some maintenance work. Business was slow for me in Greensboro. After two years, a big apartment complex installation job in Chapel Hill, and my family, encouraged me to move to the Raleigh area. Since then the landscaping end of the business has improved each year. Profits from the landscape business financed the purchase of an old tobacco farm in North Durham County in 1986. This was the beginning of my dream to have a nursery. The landscaping end of the business continued to prosper until 1991. The recession in the Triangle and my interest in spending more time in the nursery contributed to a decrease in landscape sales.

The one thing that I have found lacking in my education and experience was business training. As long as things are going well, most business owners do not

realize whether or not they are good businessmen. The real test arises when the tough times hit. A business owner needs to know how to spend money wisely and how to make the most profitable business decisions. If I had it to do over, I would take more business courses and ask more questions about the business where I worked. Now I am learning the hard way—I am trying to learn on the job. I am making mistakes, but I am learning from them, and I do not make the same mistake twice.

I am currently putting most of my energies in Hoffman Nursery, the newest part of the corporation. Hoffman Nursery is a specialty nursery that grows the new plants we believe will be winners, ornamental grasses and aquatics. The nursery has grown tremendously since its inception in 1989 and has now become the major contributor to the corporation. The nursery has been challenging and exciting from deciding what plants to grow, to learning how to grow them, to learning how to sell them, to learning how to run a successful nursery. I will never stop learning about the nursery business. I have found that talking to other people is very important. Experienced nursery businessmen can help with propagation, selling, and general problems intrinsic to owning a nursery. Persons in the peripheral green industry can be a limitless source for ideas on items to grow and who might use them.

Sharing information increases professionalism in the green industry, increases public appreciation for plants and their role in the environment, and increases respect for those who can help the public enjoy their environment.

Sandhills Community College and my internship spurred my interest in the horticultural field. Individuals currently in the Landscape Gardening Program at Sandhills or in other horticultural and landscape programs need to realize how important it is to learn about the business end of the nursery or landscape business as early as possible and to cultivate a good network of people in and out of the industry whom they can talk to for new ideas and solutions to problems. Mastering these objectives will help you be successful both professionally and personally, will help make the green industry more professional, and will help the nursery person enjoy what he or she loves best—the plants.

Mike Marshall—Speaker Three.

I am Mike Marshall from Chesapeake Nursery, Salisbury, Maryland. I grew up in the nursery where I now work. My first job ever was working with the cutting crew, stripping leaves and cutting to length the cuttings that were brought in from the plants growing at the production farm.

I was 10 years old when I started this work. My work at the nursery in the following 10 years increased from being on the cutting crew in summers to working at the greenhouse areas and at the production farm. I worked full time for 2 years after completing high school. I then also worked in propagation and in field production. Tasks included digging, loading trailers, pruning, and raking pine needles in the middle of winter for mulching the production beds. Thank goodness someone discovered pine bark for mulching! Propagation tasks included preparing cuttings and sticking cuttings, mixing media for flats, transplanting rooted cuttings to wider spacing, building greenhouses, and pulling weeds. Pulling weeds is definitely the basic horticultural experience.

After 2 years of full-time work, I decided I wanted to go to college so I could better understand the way we grew plants. I felt this step was necessary to progress

beyond the level of work I was doing at the time.

College covered some of our nursery operations and much more. College provided a foundation of horticultural knowledge in a relatively short time. It would take many years on the job to acquire the information I obtained in a few years at school, even though I grew up in a nursery where many questions were answered and many important points were explained. An employer would find it difficult to present what I learned at school, even an employer with the best intentions.

During internship, any questions I had about the work we were doing were answered with insight and clarity. The intern period was a good time to see how the ideas we learned held up in the production setting.

In the ten years since college, the ideas and procedures taught have continued to be important in every day procedures. Some of these practices are sanitizing areas for plant production, keeping accurate records, applying pesticides accurately and at the proper time, and staying active in educational seminars and meetings.

These procedures and much of the information I gained in college will be just as important 10 years from now.

In summary, the ideas taught at college give a person a foundation to enter into the field of propagation since a propagator must spend a full year following one growing cycle, keeping records, observing and learning different procedures all of which are important practices learned at college that will make a person a productive propagator.

Alan Salmon—Speaker Four.

I am Alan Salmon, I graduated from the Landscape Gardening Program at Sandhills Community College in 1981. I had not had any propagation experience before enrolling at Sandhills. Fred Garrett gave me a broad overview of both seed and cutting propagation. I completed my required apprenticeship at Angelica Nursery's 2000-acre nursery on the eastern shore of Maryland. During my 3-month stay I worked in all parts of production. I worked in the landscape industry for 3 years until I met my wife. She was already producing container herbs in a sideline business. We married and decided to go into the herb business full time.

When we started Wildwood Herbal Flower Farm in Weaverville, North Carolina, we found there was very little information about commercial production of herbs. Most books about growing herbs were written for the hobbyist or homeowner.

We started propagating in the traditional manner, using seed and cutting flats, mist systems, and heat cables. We soon found that our labor cost and efficiency needed to be improved. We began experimenting with direct sowing and sticking methods. After 11 years of trial and error we now produce 85% to 90% of our plants with the Direct Propagation Method (DPM).

Fred asked me to express my views on how the Sandhills program can better prepare students in propagation. I feel that all the program can do is give students an overview of the basics and arrange many field trips to different propagation nurseries to view their techniques. When the students graduate and start working in the propagation field, they will continue to learn in the job setting and fine-tune their skills on the plants they are producing.

CONCLUSION

Propagation is not an exact science. There are many different techniques used and many more yet to be discovered that ultimately may achieve acceptable results in all aspect of propagation. You do not have to take formal courses in propagation to be successful. However, formal courses, such as in a college curriculum, may help shorten the time required in gaining some knowledge of the techniques and theory without having to rediscover already known procedures. College courses in propagation at best are only an introduction, in a brief period of time, to a profession that will take a lifetime to perfect. As we complete this session, I propose that acceptance of a philosophy much like that of medicine be considered—we teach the practice of propagation in school—you in industry employ the practice of propagation daily. When we begin to realize that what we thought we needed to know was only part of what it takes to be successful, we see the reason for being members of this fine organization.

In closing, I would like to quote from Alice Through the Looking Glass—said Tweedledee—“If it was so, it might be; and if it were so, it would be; but as it isn’t, it ain’t.” We must always continue to look for the was so’s, the might be’s, the would be’s, and the ain’ts.