

A Propagator's Reflection: Thoughts on the Past and Future for the IPPS Western Region®

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I'd like to spend a few minutes with you talking about aging gracefully and responding to change. I'm hoping to inspire and challenge you (and myself as well). My goal is to make this relevant to us as professionals and Western Region members, so bear with me.

In one of my favorite books, *A Tale of Two Cities*, Charles Dickens begins with an observation of the contemporary history of the day:

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,
it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness,
it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity,
it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness,
it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair,
we had everything before us, we had nothing before us,
we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct
the other way — in short, the period was so far like the present
period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its
being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree
of comparison only.”

A similar metaphor is found in Chapter 3 of Ecclesiastes (Eccl 3: 1 8 NLT), where there is a well-known passage most of you will have heard:

For everything there is a season,
A time for every activity under heaven.
A time to be born and a time to die.
A time to plant and a time to harvest.
A time to kill and a time to heal.
A time to tear down and a time to build up.
A time to cry and a time to laugh.
A time to grieve and a time to dance.
A time to scatter stones and a time to gather stones.
A time to embrace and a time to turn away.
A time to search and a time to quit searching.
A time to keep and a time to throw away.
A time to tear and a time to mend.
A time to be quiet and a time to speak.
A time to love and a time to hate.
A time for war and a time for peace.

If you had to pick one word to describe the underlying theme in this passage, I don't think you could do much better than “change.” It's interesting to note a few chapters later Solomon, the author, declares: “Do not say why were the old days better than these? For it is not wise to ask such questions.” If Solomon wrote these 3,000 years ago, I think the following axioms can be drawn from his statements:

- Change is timeless and inevitable.
- Looking backwards can be educational, but can also be a snare.
- There are appropriate actions for the appropriate time.
- It should be possible to know where we are.

From my narrow point of view as a propagator and nurseryman, I have observed a great deal of change over the last 30+ years. I know that human nature tends to see the darker side of change; it would be easy to recite a litany of concerns I have as a member of the industry, if not as an American citizen; these are trying times for many of us. But that would hardly be too inspiring, would it?

I am not a flaming optimist by nature, neither do I think I'm tilted too strongly toward pessimism; preferring a more analytical viewpoint. When it comes to the glass half full versus half empty, I would tend to ask questions before committing:

- What's in the glass? Do I really want it anyway?
- Did I pay for a full glass? Why's it only half full?
- How big is the glass anyway?

And so on, you get the idea. I think I wore my mother out with questions when I was very young. One of my favorite things about propagation has always been the questions you can ask. There are always new things to learn, new discoveries and improvements to be made, along with an endless stream of new plants and cultivars to experience. If you're a little ADHD you can bounce from subject to subject for many years.

I have now been a propagator and a member of IPPS for over 30 years. In that span I have seen many changes affecting how we do business. My 55 years of life have included the advent of commercial jet aircraft, Sputnik and men on the moon; the demise of LP records, 8-track and cassette tapes, the invention of microwave ovens, photocopiers, fax machines, and personal computers, the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, etc. I know this dates me; some of you in the crowd maybe can't remember life before Starbucks and cellphones. I feel my oldest when I see a 1956 Chevy on the street and realize we may share the same birthday. Reaching this age has been a significant event for me and something of an obstacle to overcome. At some point I feel like I should grow up and act mature, after all I may not be a patriarch yet, but it can't be too far over the horizon from here. Knowing this, I have spent some time studying older people to learn from a few choice individuals who somehow managed to grow old with purpose, ability, and a good sense of humor. My favorites right now are John Wooden, the famous former basketball coach of the UCLA Bruins, and Art Linkletter, a past TV celebrity. What I admire most of these two individuals is the relevance and impact they had throughout their lives, long after their careers seemed to be over. Their examples still serve as relevant and inspirational.

Art Linkletter passed away in 2010 a few days shy of his 98th birthday. He was very active until shortly before his death, being an avid skier, swimmer, and surfer. He was a inspirational speaker, speaking 70+ times a year while in his 90s; talking to businesses, as well as those with Alzheimer's and in rest homes. His TV career included hosting several shows, including "House Party" and the "Linkletter Show." He was famous for his ability to interview kids, often with comical outcome. Out of these interviews came the book "Kids Say the Darndest Things."

John Wooden passed away last year a few months shy of his 100th birthday. He is justifiably famous for his coaching successes at UCLA, which included winning

NCAA championships 10 times in a 12-year period and 7 times in a row, as well as a record 88-game winning streak. Of far greater importance is his record as a mentor and teacher to his student athletes (which included Bill Walton and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar) as well many others in his retirement years through mentoring and books he authored; his impact post-coaching was arguably far more profound and wide-reaching.

One of John Wooden's quotes "Things work out best for the people who make the best of the way things work out" is significant for us today, perhaps more relevant is another: "Failure is not fatal, but failure to change might be."

John Wooden defined success as, "Success is peace of mind that is a direct result of self-satisfaction in knowing you gave your best effort to become the best of which you are capable." He left behind a model for achievement that he termed his "Pyramid of Success," which is built from traits to study and adopt; including industriousness, enthusiasm, loyalty, friendship, self-control, alertness, initiative, intentness, condition, skill, team spirit, poise, and confidence. At the peak is competitive greatness, illustrated by the principle that you give your best when your best is required, and that your best is required every day. I am challenged by the example he set and his words are a powerful motivation.

I see these two individuals as patriarchs whose lives and words provide guidance and inspiration worth studying. The International Plant Propagators' Society has had its share of patriarchs and mentors whose words are also worthy of remembrance.

The International Plant Propagators' Society was formed by a group of visionaries in 1951, whose primary goal was the betterment of an industry through freely sharing of knowledge among a brotherhood of professionals. The first several years of meetings were held in Cleveland, Ohio (from 1951 to 1958); we are very fortunate that not only were their presentations recorded but many of their discussions as well. The Proceedings from our first 10 years as a Society are available for free download on the Western Region website.

Edward Scanlon in his opening statement of the first IPPS proceedings said: "No man should ever entertain the thought that he is omnipotent. He may possess some little trick or secret of propagating successfully some difficult plant, but he should know also there may be others who have a better way, if not with his particular plant then with others in which he may also be having difficulties. He cannot help but be bettered by a frank interchange of knowledge; in the end, the introduction of plant aristocrats to common usage will redound to the enrichment of all, our cities, our homes, and our own personal well-being and satisfaction in having had any part, no matter how small, in the general advancement of the science of horticulture. We welcome to membership any person dedicated to a spirit of cooperation and general progressiveness."

He was followed by the first presentation of the Plant Propagators' Society given by James Wells, one of the greatest patriarchs of our Society. His opening speech should be required reading of all IPPS members. His address included these thoughts: "I have often thought that the plant propagator is more closely akin to the medical profession than to any other, for surprisingly similar qualities are required both for the good doctor and the good plantsman. A long and rigorous initial period of training followed by slow and sometimes painful acquisition of knowledge throughout a lifetime devoted to his work are equally true of both. The comparison is even closer when one considers how much success may depend upon painstaking study, the careful consid-

eration of all factors, before a diagnosis is given and treatment prescribed, for in both professions it is such attention to small intangible details.”

The author John Steinbeck aptly echoed these sentiments in his book *The Grapes of Wrath*: “The men who graft the young trees, the little vines, are the cleverest of all, for theirs is a surgeon’s hands and a surgeon’s heart to slit the bark, to place the grafts, to bind the wounds and cover them from the air. These are great men.”

James Wells went on to further elaborate on the premise of propagation being the cornerstone of horticulture: “I would like to dwell for a moment, if I may, on this question of craft. It is well for us to consider that the craftsmanship and skill of the plant propagator is the very beginning of a long chain of events running through every phase of our industry. It is upon this skill and upon nothing else quite so much, that all other parts of our great industry ultimately depend.”

Of what use would the landscape architect or the landscape constructor be to the home owner if no plants of any kind were available? Where would the florist obtain his flowers, his bulbs and his seeds, and what could be the value of fertilizers, wheelbarrows, garden centers, and garden magazines without plants? Webster’s dictionary defines horticulture as the art of growing fruits, vegetables, and ornamental plants, and all of these have to originate with the plant propagator. He is in very fact the basis of our industry.

The International Plant Propagators’ Society was formed to be an elite Society, wherein membership was coveted and earned. Venerable members and patriarchs upheld these standards for many years. For well over 50 years propagation was not only the cornerstone, but the whole foundation of the IPPS. Now we have a new logo and a seismic shift that reflect a departure from this foundation, to embrace an expansive underpinning of “plant production,” an apparent response to stagnating or declining worldwide membership; a change apparently intended to maintain the relevancy of IPPS in a climate of change.

Aging has taught me that although some change is sudden, most is gradual and best seen in hindsight. So it is with the marching on of our Society. We are constantly handing over the reins of leadership; with this also comes passing them on to younger and younger peers. Generation X, those of you born from 1965 to 1985, has become a pivotal group to direct the immediate future of IPPS; you in turn must determine how IPPS is to be relevant to Generation Y, born from 1985 to 2005. Generation Y is the most technologically savvy group the world has known, almost universally fluent in the cyber languages of our day, be it Facebook, Twitter, Skype, texting, etc. How is IPPS to maintain its relevancy to them? Perhaps an aging baby boomer is not the one who can answer this question entirely, but like James Wells, I will end my presentation with a little opinion.

The International Plant Propagators’ Society, formed with strong principles, must not depart from them. It can still be an elite organization, especially to the extent its members hold to the ideals of “Seek and Share.” The shift to embrace plant production as a primary focus ought to be regarded with great caution and our roots as a fraternity of plant propagators looked to as our first and primary focus.

Nevertheless, we face a great challenge to instill the same respect and expect the same honor and attention from a technologically erudite future generation. How can IPPS be winsome, 10, 20, or 30 years hence? I can’t answer this, other than to postulate the solution is not to be found on Facebook, through Twitter, or propagation blogs, at least not yet. You cannot replace the strong impact of a cohesive

gathering of peers allied by a common interest, adhering to jointly held values. These annual meetings have been the backbone of IPPS worldwide for 60+ years and should remain so for decades to come.

Unfortunately, membership has declined. Perhaps this is partly understandable, in light of the sorry economic state of industry. The decline in membership is less traumatic if you take to heart the admonition of James Wells to be less concerned with numbers of members verses dedication.

Quoting him again from his address to the very first Western Region meeting in 1960: "Therefore, to sum up, I would urge you to organize on a very high level. Let membership in your chapter of our society be something to be prized above all other memberships that might be available to the person concerned. Let it be something that he has to strive to attain, and once attained, has to maintain at a high level in order to keep. Let there be stringent requirements of him not only to get in but to keep in. Let him be required to contribute regularly to the meetings or to the News Letter or to some aspect of your corporate activities, so that he remains an active contributing member. It is far better that you have a modest number of such people actively working together, than that you have a large number with but few contributors. The atmosphere generated and the pleasure each will receive from your meetings in the limited group will be far greater than in the wide unrestricted one."

It is possible we may need to plan for "smaller" meetings, at least in terms of attendance; this need not be discouraging, if we bear in mind that quality is not dependent on quantity.

Change has come to us as a society. Many of the founding members were owners or employees of much smaller nurseries compared to today's standards, people who supervised every facet of their business, from propagation to sales. Today we are more likely to be employees and IPPS expense and involvement must be justified to a superior. We need to be able to demonstrate the value of participation. We also may need to adjust our meeting structure to keep costs down. There are creative ways to accomplish this.

For those of you here and those who may read this in the future, please examine your involvement with IPPS. When have you attended a meeting and not gained substantially, above and beyond your contribution? IPPS needs your enthusiasm, your presence, your seeking and your sharing. When was the last time we thought of our membership as a privilege? Our founding members did and strongly sought to build this into the fabric of our Society.

I have valued my participation with IPPS more than any other group or activity as a professional nurseryman and propagator. My hope is that this organization is able to prosper for a long time to come and that many more will find the same delight and benefit. Long live Seek and Share!

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QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Douglas Justice: Mike, I think that was a brilliant presentation. I've often thought that, like society, we're have this idea that as we go forward we must get bigger and that could be the demise of the IPPS. I certainly think it's going to water down the IPPS. So, I would agree with you and I think this deserves some greater discussion. We probably need to look at what an IPPS with fewer members would be like. I think that's clearly where we're going.

Mike Anderson: That's something that I got from reading these first Proceedings. They had a certain amount of infighting that you can find by reading through it. One of things they labored over a little bit was the number of members. There were some that really didn't want to see it grow above a small group. Part of it was the comfort level of addressing a small group as opposed to speaking to a large group. Also the freedom to share in a smaller group as opposed to a larger group. I think they understood how the dynamic would change as it grew. Jim Wells was all over that. They met 8 years in Cleveland, OH, and some fought moving anywhere else; they really wanted to stay right there. They ultimately moved to Philadelphia where they began laying the foundation for a western region. If you remember there was a presentation a few years ago from Don Dillon, a founding member of the Western Region, and there was some infighting even then since some were opposed to that happening. They wanted it to stay as one group and wanted it to stay small. The most cheering thing to me is that growing smaller isn't necessarily a bad thing. If you pick up the quality and the interchange grows, you may have a smaller group, but you can still accomplish an awful lot.

David Hannings: As I remember it, when Doug and I served on the International Board when these sorts of things were discussed, it used to be that to become a member you had to be recommended by a current member and it used to be that you had to attend and/or present every so often at an annual meeting in order to keep your membership. We've let those things slide by or gotten rid of those rules all together. Maybe that's something we can rethink. We would end up with a smaller group where active participation is more common. Many come to the annual meetings, but many others don't do anything to add to the Region.

Mike Anderson: We used to also have a junior membership level for people with limited experience. Membership used to be restricted; it wasn't easy to become an IPPS member, but I think it made it all that more desirable at the time.

Fred Hopkins: When I became a member you had to have 2 or 3 nominations. Bruce Briggs signed for me so did Fred DeWalt. That wasn't enough; you had to be "inspected." I got a phone call that a gentleman was going to come out to my nursery and I was young and really excited about joining because I had met these storied members of the Society and I wanted to borrow that knowledge. He asked me lots of questions to see whether I knew what I was doing or not and when he left I didn't know whether I was going to be accepted or not. It was really something.

Kristin Yanker-Hansen: We have a similar problem with the California Horticulture Society. We're struggling with this very issue because we're concerned that we're not bringing new people into the field of horticulture. I'm more concerned is that we're not going where society is going. Young people I see today are getting their information from the Internet. They don't yet see the value of coming to an organization like this. Some see the benefit of face-to-face contact, but there's still a disconnect. There is less respect for experience now since so much information is available online. I don't know how we address that, but I think that has to be part of the discussion.

Mike Anderson: This is the generation we need to appeal to. They have technological skills most us can only dream of having, but will never get there. How can you replace a meeting like this? You can't replace it with a blog. You can't replace shaking someone's hand and hearing some new information or seeing it for yourself.

Mike Bone: It's really easy to look around and see the demise of these great big organizations whether they are companies or societies. Our Area Meetings make it so much easier to be active, to have a voice and to seek local knowledge.

Betty Young: I'm privileged to have a vibrant internship system. Part of our internship program is teaching classes throughout the internship year that provide the scientific background for those who need it and practical experience classes during the year while they're doing regular work. Consistently, the classes that are most appreciated are the ones that are hands-on where they are learning and practicing new techniques. Our recent college graduates are so sick of PowerPoint presentations that makes teaching them new things a challenge. Maybe one way of increasing interest in the Society and in annual meetings is to make more of our activities of the hands-on type.