NHPGA Summer Meeting Recap

NHPGA members met August 11th for a night of baseball at a NH Fisher Cats game and had a discussion with Dr. Charlie Hall, the Ellison Chair in International Floriculture at Texas A&M University.

Dr. Charlie Hall shared his insight into current economic trends and how they relate to horticulture growers and retailers, helping attendees with takeaway messages to position their businesses to succeed in the coming years.

Our value proposition for the future: Emphasizing the benefits of flowers, shrubs, trees, and turfgrass

Dr. Charlie Hall

Two not-so-well-known, but insightful economic principles can be summarized as follows: (1) *expenditures rise to meet income* (C. Northcote Parkinson) and (2) *people afford what they want* (Lowell Catlett). The green industry's job (growers, service providers, and retailers alike) is to make sure they are providing #2 in such a way that they capture their fair share of #1. Stated slightly differently, if the green industry can position itself in such a way that its products/services are considered as *necessities* in people's lives and not mere *luxuries*, that is the best recession-proofing and weather-proofing it can do.

Let's examine this a bit further. The value proposition for the green industry in the future must focus on the unique ways in which *quality of life* is improved for its customer base. Much research has validated the emotional and environmental benefits of flowers, plants, and trees. In a nutshell, green industry products and services improve emotional health, boost seniors' well-being, enhance hospital recovery rates, enhance employee innovation and ideas, strengthen feelings of compassion, decrease worry and anxiety, express feelings of compassion, build stronger communities, mitigate environmental externalities, and improve the economic value of homes– just to name a few of the benefits.

The green industry cannot overemphasize the importance of this quality of life message, particularly in focusing its differentiation strategies in the future. That because of whether one are member of the Boomer, Gen X, or Gen Y generation, quality of life is a "higher order" need that is important to them. For example, although the economic downturn has increased anxiety on the part of Baby Boomers about retirement, they are nevertheless proactive in seeking innovative solutions to dealing with age. They view their new stage of life as one of activity and fulfillment rather than idleness. Gen X is the most "time-starved" generation, often juggling career and family obligations, but they maintain a strong commitment to work-life balance in their lives. The Gen Y generation is just beginning their adult lives and facing lots of firsts: their first home, first job, and most importantly, first independent income. They are trying to find the right balance between spending for necessities and spending for entertainment. This generation is concerned not just with function and utility but also with style.

All of these generational attitudes come down to one thing – enhancing the quality of their lives through emotional well-being, ecosystems benefits, and economic paybacks. Research shows that there's no better way to do this than through the daily use and/or enjoyment of flowers, plants, and trees. All the green industry has to do now is convince consumers of this in a manner that they view their products and services as *necessities* instead of *luxuries*. This will, of course, make the industry even more recession resistant in the future.

Are "Nativars" as Attractive to Bees as Straight-Species Native Flowers?

Pollinating insects—bees in particular—play a critical role in ensuring the pollination of our food supply. Bee communities, both wild and managed, have declined dramatically in recent years, getting the attention of concerned policy-makers, farmers, and citizens. Habitat loss has been identified as one of the factors attributing to the decline of bee populations. Bees rely on a diversity of flowering plants within their habitat for their food, energy, and for provisioning their young.

Numerous efforts are now underway to restore pollinator habitat and create "pollinator gardens," but little research exists to help with plant selection. Gardeners are frequently encouraged to use native plants, but most native plants available at garden centers are cultivars of native plants, also known as "nativars," which have been selected or cross-bred by humans for ornamental traits. But can we be sure that the flowering plants we buy at gardens centers are just as valuable to pollinators as those that grow naturally in the wild?

For the past three years, University of Vermont PhD Student Annie White and Extension Professor Dr. Leonard Perry, have researched how pollinators, such as bees and butterflies, interact with flowers. Specifically, they were interested in determining if cultivars of native flowering plants are as attractive to pollinators as straight species or "true natives." Because cultivars have been selected primarily based on ornamental traits, it is not clear if they perform the same ecological roles as straight species, which are open-pollinated and evolved naturally in the landscape.

White and Perry established two large research gardens where they could evaluate pollinator activity on 13 species of native flowering plants and their cultivars. For two summers, the flowers were monitored to determined how frequently pollinators visited the straight species versus the native cultivars to sip on nectar and collect pollen.

Of the 13 plant pairs evaluated, seven of the native cultivars attracted significantly fewer bee pollinators than the straight species. There was no significant difference in pollinator visits in five of the pairs. One native cultivar, *Veronicastrum virginicum* 'Lavender Towers' attracted significantly more native bee pollinators than the straight species.

The results of the study suggest that many of the native cultivars available in garden centers are just as attractive to bees. However, changes in flower color, i.e. from white (very attractive to bees) to red (not attractive to bees) or changes from a taller stature to shorter stature (resulting in far fewer flowers) did decrease the rate at which bees visited a plant. A good general rule of thumb is to choose cultivars that are most similar in color, size, stature, and bloom period to the straight species.

To read more about this research, visit:

http://www.nhpga.org/downloads/NHHE-Report-2014.pdf

2016 Winter Conference - Save the Date!

The New Hampshire Plant Growers' Association and New Hampshire Landscapers' Association in conjunction with the UNH Cooperative Extension will be holding our annual Winter Conference on January 13, 2016 at the Grappone Conference Center in Concord, NH. The primary topics of this year's meeting will include:

- -Best of the Best – Perennial Plant Evaluations for Cold Climates
- -Customer Service – Enabling employees to ensure a superior experience
- -Home garden trends and working with the media
- -Equipment Acquisitions – Loan or Lease
- -Hellstrip Gardening
- -Plants for Pollinators

We have engaged several nationally recognized speakers and encourage all to attend even if you are not a member of either organization. A formal announcement and registration will be forthcoming this fall. Please watch for it New Hampshire Farm Bureau's Weekly News & Events e-mail.

Learn More about the NHPGA, visit NHPGA.org