

Innovation and Innovators: Making a Difference Through Sharing®

Ken Tilt

Alabama Cooperative Extension Systems, Auburn University, Alabama, USA

Email: kentilt@gmail.com

Innovation is the life-blood and survival mechanism of the nursery business. Most nursery businesses are made up of “mom and pop” or family operations with very few corporate behemoths. It is still one of the few businesses in horticulture or agriculture where one can start a business with a relatively small amount of money and build slowly over time. That is changing now, but it is still being done. Limited resources require nursery entrepreneurs to be very innovative to survive. Their question is, “How can I compete among the larger nurseries, and get things done with limited labor, time, money, space, and/or materials?” This is where entrepreneurial juices flow and necessity yields action, exploitation, and realization.

Innovative ideas are everywhere, but innovation is about INNOVATORS, people who not only have great ideas but people who develop and test those ideas and navigate them through or around the system and into the market or workplace. Innovators are passionate dreamers and doers with dogged determination to make a difference. The following is a limited sampling of those ideas and “hort-truisms” that have made a difference in the industry and some thoughts on testing and marketing your ideas. Most of the innovators have been long-time members of and contributors to I.P.P.S.

A guiding hort-truism that leads many growers to higher quality plants is “Make a good environment for the roots and the top will take care of itself.” Dr. Carl Whitcomb has been a leader in this area and has dedicated most of his career to teaching and developing better root systems (<<http://www.rootmaker.com>>) and getting others to “Think Roots.” He has shared his RootMaker® containers and other innovations, and they have been adopted by many growers in our industry. RootMaker® containers direct and air-prune roots to create more fibrous roots and eliminate circling roots. Carl Whitcomb offers a good illustration of the value of vigilance and staying power in getting an innovation/product adopted by the industry. There is an expression that “the early bird gets the worm” but sometimes better advice is “the second mouse gets the cheese”! To introduce a plant or product in our industry takes time, money, research, and industry-based proof of how the new product will make money for a company.

Foam containers were a reasonably good product but were introduced before all the kinks were eliminated, and the innovators could not get the traction and support to make it profitable. Bob Rigsby of Rigsby Nursery in Florida developed and patented an effective container design, the environmentally friendly container or raised-hole container. Mr. Rigsby did his research and offered a proven product but could not get the production link along with the needed marketing to make his product hit the mainstream.

Don Shadow of Winchester, Tennessee, is one of the leading plantmen in the U.S.A. and has a passion, an eye, and the marketing skills to offer a constant stream of new and superior plants into the industry. He has taught many young nursery producers the hort-truism, “if you are growing a plant, you should be the

most knowledgeable person in the business about what you are growing for sale.” Don is a promoter, and his knowledge, integrity, quality plant introductions, and reputation sell plants. Don has not been a strong proponent of patenting plants. He has developed such a great reputation of having an eye for new plants and getting them to the market that smaller growers with less marketing skills and resources share with Don to see their plants reach the market. Don builds up a large inventory and puts them on the market, and by the time they are picked up and multiplied by others, he has made his money and is on to new things.

Don is a second generation nurseryman. His father, Hoskins Shadow, of Tennessee Valley Nursery was also a great innovator. He is hailed as the “Dean of Dogwoods” in Middle Tennessee also known as the “Nursery Capitol of the World.” His contributions are many, but a personal life lesson and hort-truism I learned from Hoskins Shadow was “Keep good records. If some disease, insect, or physiological problem happens once in your nursery, chances are you will see it again.” I offer a personal story in my early career as an extension specialist at the University of Tennessee. We were having an unusual problem with dogwoods in the field at a number of nurseries. I went to see Mr. Shadow and described the problem. He scratched his head and pulled out one of many volumes of black books with his personal notes and thumbed back to an earlier year and date that he had seen and solved the problem. He shared with me, and I passed it on to others. Not following my own advice, I do not remember the problem! If you are not a good record keeper, assign the task to someone who is! For pesticide applications in the U.S.A., it is now the law to keep good records, but it is also a good business practice.

Jim Berry, previously of Flowerwood Nursery and a past International President of I.P.P.S., made his contributions by offering an opportunity for backyard growers or breeders to have an outlet for patenting and marketing their plants. Encore Azaleas®, developed by Mr. Buddy Lee, was the flagship plant that led Jim to develop Plant Development Services Inc. (PDSI) under the umbrella and national marketing strength of Flowerwood Nurseries in Mobile, Alabama. The innovation was to offer the expertise, avenue, and reward structure for the “little person” to see their dream plants and intellectual property reach the masses. This is an old universal and hort-truism of “Find a need or a barrier and use available resources to provide a mutually beneficial solution.”

There are many wonderful plantsmen/women and companies in our industry. One company that has been on the leading edge for innovation has been Carolina Nurseries of Moncks Corner, South Carolina (<<http://www.carolinanurseries.com>>). Jay and Linda Guy are the innovative team. Carolina Nurseries was one of the first companies to develop an extensive, dedicated, cooperative relationship on the East Coast with the Horticulture Department at Clemson University. They followed the hort-truism “Provide support for those who support you, and everyone benefits.” Jay had production problems without answers, and Clemson had talented researchers without resources. Carolina Nurseries provided dedicated space, plants, labor, and some monetary support to do industry-wide research but also research that was needed by Carolina Nurseries. This was later taken to a new level at McCorkle Nurseries in Dearing, Georgia (<www.mccorklenurseries.com>) with the cooperation of the University of Georgia. The Center for Applied Nursery Research (Center) (<<http://www.canr.org>>) was established at the nursery with expanded support from nurseries around the southeast U.S.A. and with invitations

and grant opportunities to do research for professors throughout the southeast U.S.A. A research task force creates a concerns list, and proposals are solicited. A research panel reviews, selects, and offers funding and support at the Center for targeted research priorities. Many practical research projects have been viewed at annual research field days. Dr. Michael Dirr and others have developed and released many new plant selections through this Center including the recent dwarf crapemyrtle series Razzle-Dazzle®. You can go to the web site to review research results over the past few years.

A problem mid-sized nurseries have is that they have moved into an area where they are in direct competition with the big nurseries, yet they do not have the economies of scale or marketing resources to win the battle. Carolina Nurseries was able to look at other business models and apply them to our industry by creating cooperative marketing agreements among similarly sized nurseries with similar problems. In 2002, Carolina Nurseries founded Novalis (<<http://www.novalis.com>>), a grower's consortium that grows, distributes, markets, and merchandises unique/exciting plant selections to independent garden centers across the country. The Novalis product lines are encompassed in several proprietary programs and collections under the Plants That Work® brand. By creating a coalition of nurseries into a marketing group, expenses were spread across a number of nurseries.

Small nurseries also often do this to consolidate purchases for a lower price. They may share booth space at a trade show or share equipment as well as feature each other's plants in their catalogues to offer a more complete line of plants. Hort-truism: "Look for opportunities for cooperation to reduce costs."

There is a hort-truism for marketing in the nursery business: "Be Somebody: Develop an image that separates you from the pack and creates a lasting memorable image with potential customers." An early lesson learned from a great family nursery in Tennessee was to use creative marketing to quickly catch attention and evoke some level of trust or "likability." Pleasant Cove Nursery in McMinnville, Tennessee, was/is a mid-sized family nursery in a sea of over 800 other nurseries in that region. Typical marketing at the time was to put out a plant catalogue with the logo of the nursery and maybe a picture of a field of plants. Pleasant Cove offered a similar catalogue, but instead of the same tree or shrub, they revealed much of themselves through a simple picture of one of the owners, David Collier, and his son planting a tree in the nursery as the proud father taught and directed the future nursery generation. The page offered a quick view of family, caring, and trust and inspired a few seconds more to absorb the name of the nursery. Of course the Collier family backs up this image in real life.

There is another nurseryman who is famous/infamous for his bigger-than-life promotions of his groundcover nursery, Wilbur Mull of Classic Groundcovers in Georgia. Wilbur is a showman and a true master auctioneer who volunteers his skills each year for the I.P.P.S. Southern Region auction. You are always greeted with a smile, handshake, and often his trademark \$2 bill. He has made the slogan "Home of Sudden Service" synonymous with his nursery (<www.classic-groundcovers.com/>). How do you make your flat of ivy or liriopse look different than the rest? Wilbur Mull has orange suspenders, a 10-gal hat, and an endless supply of over-the-top ideas that keep his plants on the tip of many landscapers' tongues, as well as the service of plants, whenever, wherever you need them.

One other marketing illustration is of an internet sales company owned by Tony

Avent of Plants Delight (<<http://www.plantdelights.com>>). This nurseryman uses his passion for plants, humor, and writing skills to leave a lasting impression. His articles and presentations on the speaker's circuit as well as unusual plants propel his unique nursery to success. A true "plant nerd," Tony's travels and unique plant collections have helped him develop a devoted following of other plant nuts/nerds along with "normal" people who will pay the price for "rare and unusual." Some of Tony's articles and plant names include "Bizzare Plants Only a Mother Could Love," "If You Can't Stand the Heat, Get Out of the Garden," *Acanthus* 'Tazmanian Angel', *Corydalis* 'Berry Exciting', and *Hosta* 'White Wall Tire', and he offers his receipt of emails under "Compliments," "Hate Mail," and "Twilight Zone." Visit his entertaining web site. Hort-truism again: "Be Somebody!"

Charlie Parkerson, another past I.P.P.S. International President, is one of our most innovative nursery producers. His big gift is his constant quest to "do it better" and believe in the talents of his people. Charlie never leaves a question unasked or accepts an incomplete answer. He exploits, mines, and believes in using the gifts of his employees. His nursery and employees "exploit ideas" as part of their daily work. Every visit reveals something new that is being tried; they are not always successful but are always open to trying and to improving. This nursery was one of the first nurseries to test and make commonplace, pot-in-pot production. Working with Virginia Tech and Robert Wright, they found a way to use suction cup lysimeters to test soluble salts and monitor nutrition easily in large containers.

Buddy Martin of Martin's Nursery in Semmes, Alabama, is an individual I like to send people to for advice when they get into the nursery business. Buddy's words of wisdom/hort-truism is that "you need to start small and pay as you go." It is easier to grow plants than it is to find a home for them.

The final example of innovators from a list that could extend much longer is one of the most respected plantsmen from Alabama, Tom Dodd III. Dodd is in his 80s and has had a long career leading by example. He lives and projects integrity and illustrates the hort-truism that "your name goes with every plant you sell." Long-term success mandates that you make your name one that earns respect and loyalty. A nursery retailer, a 30-year customer, once expressed that he would always buy from Mr. Dodd because he had treated him well and offered help when he needed it. It is easier and less expensive to retain old customers than develop new ones.

Associations and their leadership/members can also contribute innovative ideas. The Southern Nursery Association has sponsored a research conference for over 50 years with on-line, searchable access to production and economic nursery research results (<www.sna.org>). It is an invaluable, easily accessible, free resource to the industry. A recently published updated Best Management Practices Manual for Nursery Production is a cooperative effort of researchers, nursery professionals, and environmental regulation administrators. It offers the most current research-based, best-management practices for the nursery industry. It is a nursery reference worth purchasing on-line for your horticulture library.

These innovations and other more physical/concrete contributions come through trial and error at universities and nurseries. There are some tips to follow when developing and introducing innovative ideas to the industry:

- Keep the test simple. Look at only one or two variables. Too many things to monitor confuses "cause and effect" and interpretation of results. Look at fertilizer rate and species trials, not fertilizer, spe-

- cies, media, and irrigation!
- Always use a control or your current practice to compare. How do you know if you are improving if you do not compare it to something you are already doing — a standard/control.
 - Designate a site, not to be moved or sold, during the evaluation. Place signs, colored tape, scarecrows, or electric fences (if you must) to ensure all your work is not in vain.
 - Label! Label! Label! Mark your treatments so you will know what is what. Tags fade or get lost. Use a paint pen to mark directly on the container and draw a plot plan or map of the plant treatment locations as a back up.
 - Ask for assistance from your industry technical representatives. If they believe in their products, they will be happy to show you how their product performs.
 - Replicate your treatments. Use at least a minimum of 3 to 4 replications but preferably 5 or 6 to get a true measure and account for natural variability of the plants.
 - Randomize or mix-up your treatments so irrigation, sun, cold pockets, or other external variables will not give you false results. I often (which is not statistically correct but is “backyard research” correct) arrange the first replication by treatment so I can glance and see my treatments without referring to map of the treatments.
 - Try to be as uniform as possible with other cultural practices so as not to influence the outcome with external variables. Measure application rates carefully and calibrate equipment.
 - Researchers look for “statistical differences” where real world nurseries look for “economic differences.” It is good to do measurements and get an accurate evaluation of your demonstration/ research but from a practical/economic perspective, you want to know if the new treatment makes you money! When you de-randomize the project (put all the treatment replications side by side for comparison), can you see a visible difference in the size of the plant, number of flowers, reduction in weeds, or incidence of pathogens/pests or other desirable outcomes you are trying to measure? Is that difference enough to make your plants more marketable or will the new practice justify the expense? Will you make money or offer some marketing or possibly a safety edge by introducing this new practice?
 - As always, Seek and Share. It is what we do in I.P.P.S.