Beginnings

To begin my first column as President of ASHS, I would like to state that I am honored to have this opportunity to serve our society and humbled by the confidence you have placed in me. Since this column is titled “Reflections”, I will take the opportunity to reflect on how I came to be interested in horticulture as a career. To set the stage for that reflection, I will describe some observations made at a recent ASHS board of directors meeting while discussing a survey on the attitudes and knowledge of young people today about horticulture. These comments were made as part of a discussion of the Seed Your Future program, of which ASHS is a major supporter. One specific comment involved the fact that the majority of young people (primary school age) did not know what the term ‘horticulture’ meant, but they did seem to be interested in plants and gardening and other related horticultural activities. The dialogue summarized John Dole’s “Reflections” column titled “Seed Your Future—Promoting Horticulture” in the August 2017 ASHS Newsletter. The resulting discussion revolved around whether or not different terms should be used to describe our profession. Terms such as “plantologist” and “plant specialist” were discussed as preferred terms suggested by middle school students. There was some surprise expressed by those present that most young people did not know what horticulture represents. Thus, I offer a reflection on my childhood. (Yes, I still remember that far back…well, some of it anyway.)

I grew up in a small, semi-rural community that would have been described as being below the poverty level. It was located on the edge of a medium-sized city in southern Appalachia in the shadow of the mountains. My parents did not farm; but my grandfather did, and I spent much of my time helping him with various activities on his small farm. These activities included feeding chickens, pigs, and turkeys; milking cows; and working in the vegetable and flower (also a cash crop, but a particular passion of my grandmother) gardens. My grandfather was considered a “truck gardener,” since he sold all of his products directly out of his truck in the local town markets and directly to people in the community. In fact, he gave away a lot of it to people not in the position to buy it. Many southern Appalachian communities at that time made a common practice of helping neighbors without expectation, and those same neighbors returned the gesture in kind as they were able. Influenced at an early age by my grandparents and mother, I decided that I wanted to work in a profession that would ensure that my children and grandchildren had an abundant food supply. While I was directly engaged in the profession as a young person, I had no idea what the term ‘horticulture’ meant. However, I did have a great childhood in this environment, and I learned a lot about what would today be described as a systems approach to farming. In fact, upon reflection, I also had a lot of experience in organic
farming, but only came to think of it as organic farming once I was in graduate school. I did not think about anything related to what I did on my grandfather’s farm as a way of making a living. It had been a pretty subsistence way of life; and, although it had provided a great childhood, I perceived it as a stressful and undesirable way to make a living as a young adult. So did the thousands of other young people in the area who left their parents’ small farms and moved to the Midwest to work in factories that provided steady incomes. Much has been written about that migration.

I became interested in science in high school after being influenced by an outstanding biology instructor. So, I went to college to study science. However, due to those early farming experiences, I decided that I wanted to use science and work in a profession that would have a positive impact on food security. I started college majoring in agronomy, but quickly switched to biochemistry because of my interest in the science behind how plants develop. Then, in a botany class on world food crops, I had an excellent instructor who emphasized the global distribution of plants that were important in feeding the world. She also emphasized the importance of science in improving and maintaining the global food supply. Her class introduced me to the term “horticulture” and uncovered a path for me to use my love of science and fulfill my desire to influence food production in a positive way. I changed my major back to agriculture, more specifically horticulture, and have since never lost my passion for our profession. I later joked with that instructor that her class was the one that made me decide to leave botany/biochemistry. She was responsible for reuniting me with fond memories of my grandfather’s farm and making me realize that I could use my passion for science to work in a field that had a direct influence on feeding my children and grandchildren. It was a pivotal moment for me that would not have occurred without that early experience with farming and, in particular, vegetable and flower growing at a young age. So, what does this mean for the future of ASHS? Today, there are many fewer children who have the opportunity to gain experiences on farms. Only about 2% of the population derives it living directly from farming, resulting in only a small number of children having the opportunity for direct farm experiences. Like me, they do not initially consider careers in horticulture, no matter what we call our field. They think of horticulture and all of agriculture as a hard way to make a living. They do not know that, although only 2% of the population are farmers, there are many exciting, desirable, and lucrative careers in horticulture. What are we currently doing, and what do we plan to do about this perception? This is one area I hope to emphasize in the coming year as president of ASHS—supporting and continuing the efforts started by my predecessors.

I strongly feel that ASHS is the preeminent science-based society for horticulture in the US, and this is due entirely to the dedication of its talented and diverse membership. ASHS is fortunate to have a membership composed of many of the world’s best researchers, teachers, and extension and industry professionals, not only in the US but also representing 58 countries worldwide. ASHS also has an excellent headquarters staff that continues to be extremely professional and efficient in providing the framework for our society. I wish to thank all of them as they provide the structural support required to keep our society functioning. Yet, ASHS is predominately a volunteer-based society whose programs depend on its membership to not only maintain current activities, but also to grow and meet the challenges of the future.
One of my duties as ASHS President-elect was to nominate members for open committee positions within the society. I was pleased to find that we had an excellent response to the request for volunteers. I am proud to say that the majority of members asked to serve accepted without hesitation. Our volunteer spirit is alive and well! This is particularly important as our society moves into the future because there are some potential challenges ahead that will require all of us to step up and help guide the future of ASHS. ASHS is currently in a sound position financially and in regard to operations. Yet, there are challenges ahead that we should start addressing now in order to remain strong in the future. Past President Curt Rom took a big step in addressing topics related to our continuing success by announcing a strategic planning process in the September 2015 ASHS Newsletter. Later that fall in November, he surveyed the membership on issues of concern for our society’s future. The results of that survey were used to develop a SOAR analysis of the results. Past President John Dole followed up on this survey in Spring 2017 by appointing three Task Forces to develop ideas for actions that should be taken in order to respond to the suggestions from Rom’s membership survey and SOAR analysis. Rom, Dole and I agreed to use the results of the committee reports to formulate another survey to solicit further membership input on the actions that ASHS should take to ensure a strong future for our society. That survey will be emailed to the membership in the near future, and I ask that all of you take the time to respond to this survey. I know that we are all busy professionals, but if we feel strongly about the future of ASHS and especially if you have suggestions for changes that should be made to improve our society, this is your chance to have your voice heard.

There have been several exciting programs and activities resulting from previous ASHS presidential efforts and the direct involvement of our membership. The establishment of HortIM and the Seed Your Future program are excellent examples. These programs have been discussed in previous “Reflections” columns by past presidents Mary Meyer and Mike Arnold in the ASHS Newsletter. These programs were conceived out of a perceived need for the future of ASHS and developed as a result of the visionary leadership of many of our members. My desire is that we continue enjoying our success in the present, but that we assure our success in the future by developing programs and activities now that anticipate and resolve potential obstacles before they threaten our future success.

Based on recommendations from John Dole’s task forces, this year the ASHS board of directors approved the formation of three new General Administration Committees that will help shape the future of ASHS. These committees are: 1) The Events and Education Planning Committee, 2) the Media Communications Committee, and 3) the Partnership Development and Sponsorship Committee. The duties of these committees are outlined on the ASHS Committees page. I look forward to working with these committees over the coming year.

I have also been working to strengthen our relationship with other scientific societies. We are currently working on a proposal with AAAS that would allow ASHS members to gain access to an excellent set of training modules on professional job development skills at a reduced cost without joining AAAS. These modules include topics such as resume development, job interviewing skills, and preparing for a science career outside of academia. I have collected information on this potential program and presented it to the ASHS Board of Directors for discussion. I have also contacted the American Society of Agronomy and the Crop Science Society to open discussions on ways that our societies could cooperate in the future on joint
projects. These could include meeting at the same location at future conferences, having special sessions before or during each of our annual conferences to bring together members from each society that have a common interest in a particular area of research, and the feasibility of offering members of our sister societies registration at annual conferences (in a reciprocal agreement) at member registration prices to stimulate attendance and cross-disciplinary programs.

During my term as President-elect I worked to develop ideas on areas that I feel are critical to the continued success of ASHS. In future “Reflections”, I plan to discuss the following issues:

1. Ideas for increasing the value of membership in ASHS to undergraduate and graduate students to assure a strong future for our society.
2. Ideas for retaining and attracting members who work in specialty crop areas but who have found other societies and meetings to meet their needs better. What could our publications and meetings offer to stimulate interest in ASHS as a valued membership for these professionals?
3. What are the foundations of our society’s success, and how do we assure continued success in the future. One example is publications. Publications are a significant source of our base income. It is apparent that in the future we may need to move toward open access publication, and this will directly impact our society’s financial base. How and when do we start making a move toward open access, and what will be the implications for how our membership views our publications?

I look forward to working with all of our membership to assure that ASHS remains strong, relevant, and the society of choice for all specialty crop professionals in the future. My hope is that 30 years from now our current graduate students will be as proud as I am to be a member of ASHS and as honored as I feel today to serve our society. In closing, I want to again say thanks for giving me this opportunity; and I hope that if you have suggestions or comments, both positive and constructively negative, please feel free to contact me at carlsams@utk.edu.