

LOUISE FERGUSON: HORTICULTURE WITHOUT BORDERS

The story of Louise Ferguson carries an odd trajectory. Yet it serves as an inspirational example. There was no early childhood template for her for any horticultural awareness. Her formative years were defined by disappointment and struggle and tragedy. And her undergraduate work led her down a path quite removed from what would become her life's focus. But when she did find herself embraced within the horticultural fold, she made a beneficial impact felt around the world.

Planet Earth has never been a single entity devoid of strictly regarded borders and international strife. Ours is a bellicose little place filled with competitive pettiness and often tenuously held peace. And while there have been notable times when advances in science have assisted our efforts to hurt and destroy each other, most often intellectual and academic growth has been a unifying factor, lifting all boats with the rising water and helping to soften the rigidity of many borders to otherwise closed countries.

Horticultural science continues to be a leader in the global pursuit of shared benefit, and as a very broad field, it has contributed to the possibility of actual peace in the world. Within the membership of ASHS, one among the many who have generated such a considerable amount of international good will between diverse countries by advancing research projects no matter where the scientific study takes her – is Dr. Louise Ferguson of the University of California, Davis.



Louise Ferguson is known throughout the world for several very specific advances in horticultural research, many of them international collaborations. As a direct result of those, Ferguson not only shared her astounding expertise with the brightest minds of countries who learned greatly from her involvement with them, but she was also in the singular position to learn from them. And it is their knowledge and their experience that she was able to bring home to the benefit of her own continuing research and to the benefit of the United States.

These efforts, among many other calculable benefits, have helped to create the true sense of friendship and cooperation between nations. Few things unite disparate people like a common goal. And few categories are more crucial to recognize as a common goal than horticulture. Saving crops, making dying fields fertile, better irrigation, unveiling clean pest control are among the areas that can save at-risk populations and boost an area's agricultural fiscal interests to the shared gratitude of all countries. And Louise Ferguson is an incidental leader in that cause.

But Ferguson's path toward being a horticultural superstar is atypical at best.

Louise Ferguson was born in San Bernardino, California, into a family that had no interest in horticulture of any sort. No family garden, and no desire to landscape the yard outside of mowing the lawn once a week. Her father was a high school graduate who was self-employed as a tool maker. He made molds of standard tools and die-cast them to the desired quantity and sold them to hardware stores on his own. Her mother was a Wellsley graduate, and she dedicated herself to being a homemaker.

When Louise was two years old, her father's independent tool-making enterprise was failing, so the family moved to her father's home community in Michigan where he could start anew. He continued making die-cast tools. In Michigan, Louise grew up and enjoyed the outdoor life there. But still, she had no exposure to horticulture except when she was a pre-teen and took a summer job picking strawberries with the migrant crews who would travel to various farms as affordable labor.

When Louise was thirteen, her father's tool-making business was again failing. This time, the family moved to southeast Pennsylvania, near her mother's family. But life did not get easier. It got much worse.

Louise's father was again realizing failure within his business. Hardware stores by that time held contracts with national tool manufacturers, and in greater numbers than ever before, they could not do business with independent tool makers. This renewed economic downturn left her father with essentially no prospects. The coinciding depression that had been growing within him for years had magnified. And he took his own life.

It was a tragedy that understandably rocked her family. It left them in an all-time emotional low. Their struggle to survive had been prominent for years, and this heightened all of that. Louise's mother had to push through her own grief to provide for what was now four children, Louise and her three siblings. So Louise's mother moved herself and her four kids into her parents' home, and she qualified for teaching credentials and began working as a teacher. Having seen her mother have to support the family after her father's death instilled in Louise the notion that she did not want to become dependent on anyone to establish a sense of security. She wanted to develop skills.

After a few years, Louise studied anthropology at Pennsylvania State University. That major would prove helpful in her future purposes. But even by this time, she had no significant exposure to, or even interest in, horticulture.

She fell in love and got married. Together, Louise and her husband moved to Baltimore. There, one of her new friends gave her a plant, her very first plant ever. It was a spider plant. And she took very good care of it. Later, she and her husband moved to Florida. There, finally, her developing interest in plants exploded into a more major hobby.

Louise accepted a position at the University of Florida Hospital as a Pediatric Echocardiography Technician. And because of that, she was able to take free classes at the University. At first, these classes were not vocational in her mind. They were only intellectual considerations of her comparatively newfound fascination with plants that she intended to care for at home, to improve her personal garden. But one thing led to another. A vegetable crops course led her to build an entire academic profile for herself. And that led to an MS and a PhD in horticulture. And like that, she had embarked upon a fresh career.

Now dubbed Dr. Ferguson, Louise developed a modest expertise in dealing with Mediterranean tree crops. Equipped with that in her arsenal, she accepted a position as an Extension Specialist at the University of California, Davis. So back to the west coast she went.

She began research on determining better practices for growing tree crops and improving quality and quantity of yield. Her initial studies included pistachios, olives, and all manner of citrus crops. In order to be thorough, she wanted to get data on how these growing practices are currently done, wherever they are done. That meant travel. Her destinations were solely based on her research needs. She found herself traversing paths often considered inadvisable for Americans. But she was warmly received in places like Iraq, Pakistan, and Afghanistan by the scientific communities she encountered there. She discovered techniques that were foreign to her but that were equally as effective as the practices she employed on tree crops of the same or similar varieties in California.

Ferguson reflects that her undergraduate degree in anthropology has come in handy in her many opportunities to mix with other cultures. She stepped into her research work already knowing that not everyone shares her experiences and views. It gave her an openness that was observed and appreciated by her hosts, and it likely contributed to her very active acquisition of data.



She did not realize it fully at the time, but Dr. Louise Ferguson was cracking the seal to several global hotspots for a free and peaceful exchange of ideas. Plus, she was representing America as a nation of genial people interested in learning and in giving. She was making friends.

The United States Department of Agriculture became a helpful conduit for her to find receptive farmers and foreign scientific communities from which she could glean significant benefit from nearly unprecedented exchanges. The scale of her research bumped up dramatically, and the amount of research travel to which she committed would have been dizzying to most. These things contributed to her becoming a known entity to scientific communities internationally.

However, it has been her concentration in Iran that has proved truly stunning. To be clear, relations between the United States and Iran have been less than stellar for quite a long time. Recent policy-based pressures have served to ratchet up the tension to an untenable point. Attitudes between our two nations have deteriorated further. And the scent of hostile responsive action appears readily detectable.

Yet the calm of cooperation provided almost solely by Dr. Louise Ferguson's continuity of presence in Iran has yielded a beacon of hope. For science, she continues to walk paths in Iran where few Americans feel safe stepping. She has bridged a gap between people on both sides who recognize their pursuits supersede the irate interactions of their governments' political stance. The results have been prolific. In both countries, the food table has expanded and broadened. She has derived knowledge on successfully growing and irrigating tree crops on seemingly hostile topography, and that has continued to benefit California.

Dr. Ferguson has written extensively about her voluminous research projects, and aspects of her acquired knowledge have been put into useful effect across our nation.

Furthermore, she has hosted visiting Iranian scientists and students in her home and at the University of California, Davis many times. She told her kindred researchers there that her door would be open to them, and she meant it. Their exposure to her methodology has helped their food tables also. Together, they continue to hone better practices that are gloriously helpful within these two nations and beyond.

As for Ferguson's involvement with ASHS, she has been a member since 1980, nearly as long as she has been making trips to Iran. She declares that her association with ASHS has been pivotal in maintaining the strength of her career. As an international organization, ASHS has assisted her desire to make contacts with key scientists and potential hosts with the various places she might direct her research.

She has played a crucial role with us by serving as a Consulting Editor for our publications.

And now she is set to become the next President of ASHS. As such, she is keenly interested in improving the leadership skills of our younger members and rising graduate members. She wants to properly prepare and motivate them to become the department chairs, deans, provosts, chancellors, policymakers, and company presidents of the future.

And why not? After all, Dr. Louise Ferguson is picture perfect as a personal example of how a person can rise into a position of effectiveness. Her chapter two has been phenomenal.

Can't wait for chapter three.