

Virginia Walter: Using the Power of Floriculture to Elevate Agriculture

For more than 45 exciting and satisfying years, Virginia Walter delivered a steady supply of floriculture and horticulture education to students eager to get out into the world and apply their growing skills. On the way, she became The Queen of Greenhouses and helped to provide a body of knowledge that is so ubiquitous across all realms of horticulture that most of us take her contributions for granted. But without her, and other floriculturists like her, even growing food would be much different.

Life was sweet for Virginia Walter when she grew up in Columbus, Ohio. She was born there in 1947 to a loving and attentive family. She was the second of two children, following her brother George by a year and a half. Together they embodied the ideal of post-war America. Comfortable home. Reliable car. Clean living. Her father worked for the Bureau of Unemployment Services where he dedicated himself to ensuring that others were able to feel fruitful and productive. It was his way of making society incrementally better, person by person.

Virginia relished being with her loving and caring parents. She had plenty of friends, but she most enjoyed doing activities with her mom and dad. And one of their favorite family pastimes was working in the garden together. They had a full garden in a nearby plot, a short walk from their house where they raised most of the vegetables they ate. It was larger than what people at that time considered a “Victory Garden”. The home property was nicely filled with flowers of a terrific variety, both front and back yards. They also grew fruit bearing trees.

And like most who grew up during the Great Depression, her parents were conditioned to be frugal. They liked growing vegetables for their table, partly because they didn’t have to buy them. And they canned as much as they could during the growing seasons to tide them over during the winter months. But even as a child, Virginia more appreciated all the flowers that made their property so beautiful.

In her youth, Virginia held a limited understanding that one’s course in life doesn’t remain constant. Change is inevitable. And often, changes are undesirable. For her, the pleasantness of that period of family togetherness could have frozen in time forever, and she never questioned the fleeting nature of any of that. But when she was 13 years old, her mom passed away due to cancer.

Undeniably, this was among the lowest points of Virginia Walter’s life, even now as she reflects over her 72 years. Her dad was devastated. The loss crushed him for quite some time afterward. His solace remained in providing for, and attending to, his daughter. He never faltered as a loving and doting father. And he held onto the pride and pleasure derived from helping people find employment and from dispensing government aid to those in need.

But a few years later, Virginia’s dad was able once again to find love in his life. He remarried, and Virginia’s new stepmother proved to be a godsend to them both. She cared deeply for Virginia and made purposeful gestures designed to preserve the memory of her mother. As a family, they moved to a larger house with a larger back yard. And there, they cultivated a larger garden. Among other things, it provided for Virginia a sense of continuity, of stability. It was an activity that reminded her of her mother, and her stepmom supportively furthered Virginia’s potential.

When it was time for her to attend college, Virginia applied and was accepted to Ohio State University. For years before that, she assumed she would go there to study one day as she nearly lived in its shadow. OSU was four miles from her house. To get there, she would ride the city bus every morning.

She was a motivated student, and she excelled. The academic environment was thrilling to her. She majored in Botany. In doing so, she realized something of a calling. Her youthfully cultivated familiarity with gardening was her springboard, but the course load she built brought her to new heights. She was fortunate enough to study under the legendary D. C. Kiplinger who taught for 40 years at Ohio State. He received many commendations and awards before his death in 1977, and he is remembered by the moniker “Mr. Floriculture”. Under his direction and guidance, Virginia’s budding attraction to ornamentals flourished.

In Virginia’s mind, the “Golden Era” of Floriculture was a glorious span of achievement and innovation starting from after World War II and lasting until the end of the twentieth century. Beginning with her access to D. C. Kiplinger, Virginia Walter had a front row seat to much of that era and the luminaries who made it great. For that, she feels privileged.

She stayed at Ohio State University to complete her masters in Horticulture in 1971. She still considers herself a Buckeye at heart. At the time, it felt like home. When she had achieved her masters, she remained at OSU for three more years as the greenhouse manager there.

In 1974, Virginia was offered a teaching position at California State Polytechnic University and began a stable career that lasted until two years ago when she retired at the age of 70.

She found so many aspects of joy within her work life. She was already fascinated with greenhouses as instruments of agriculture and floriculture, and she spent a great deal of time and energy researching their variations, and Walter was becoming not merely a greenhouse specialist. She was becoming an expert.

Virginia Walter taught courses at Cal Poly in greenhouse production. Naturally, she dedicated substantial academic attention to vegetable greenhouse production, but she also offered hydroponic roses and gerberas. Hydroponics were important for her as she saw this technique for its utility and potential.

In the realm of floriculture, she has cherished being allowed such a thorough and hands-on approach to cut flowers and potted plant production. Ornamental plants took up a dominant ratio of her concentration. She has remained passionate about them. She feels that ornamentals, like pets, make the world better for their owners. But they also served a practical good as test subjects during her efforts in tweaking the effectiveness of greenhouses.

Her teaching duties were another joyous component of the life she built. Today, she contemplates proudly upon her influence on the army of eager minds she has encountered over the years and the strategic placement many of her former students have since commanded across the broad horticulture industry.

Virginia Walter was also an inductee into Pi Alpha Xi, the honor society formed in 1923 and originally to recognize those within academia who have distinguished themselves within floriculture and ornamental horticulture. Today, Pi Alpha Xi embraces all horticultural disciplines and has grown to 40 chapters with approximately 14000 members. Chapters are only located in the United States at four-year institutions with programs in horticulture, and it remains properly selective. During the period of her time with this national honorary, Virginia has been proud to serve as its President, Vice President, and Secretary/Treasurer. And she was even voted in as one of its Fellows too.

However, the achievement that she regards as her greatest source of personal pride involves her years as the coach of the Cal Poly Flower Judging Team as contestants in the National Flower Judging Contest sponsored by Pi Alpha Xi. In it, her students were evaluated on their abilities to aptly judge items on the spot. The contest was designed to discern a contestant's ability to judge the cultural perfection of various floriculture crops like cut flowers, potted plants, and foliage plants. The contest consisted of twenty or more classes, each with four entries. Each student judge had three minutes to visually evaluate them and place them in the correct first, second, third, and fourth order. Each participating university was represented by a three-person team. The "Flower Judging Manual" written over the course of several years by Pi Alpha Xi coaches served as the guiding authority for contestants, and it became the beacon for consistent evaluation.

An additional activity allowed contestants to do a type of floral arrangement chosen by the host school. Cal Poly teams were chosen after 10 weeks of competitive judging at home. When all the at-home scores were tallied, the three students with the highest ranking were selected to be the school's representative team. And after such a disciplined concentration, the Cal Poly team did remarkably well. Students always took this competition most seriously, and Virginia Walter fielded teams with a phenomenal success rate.

Under Virginia's guidance, the Cal Poly team became National Champions several times during the 23 years she served as its coach. Her students received a flurry of individual and team awards. In fact, one might suppose that she and the Cal Poly team are reigning national champs today as this national contest ceased to exist after they won its top prize in 2008. The competition discontinued then as a result of belt tightening at universities across the country.

But her contributions with greenhouses is important in an additional admirable way. Virginia's work with them is among those that has made them better. She explains that throughout the industry she has noticed favor and focus going to her colleagues who concentrate their research on agriculture above the many notable achievements springing forward from the realm of floriculture. But she points out that the successes realized from any pocket of the wider horticulture community, especially those involving improvements in greenhouse usage and technology, were born to some extent from floricultural advances. Innovations now viewed as commonplace began with floriculture.

Virginia is currently an active ASHS emeritus member. She joined us in 1971 while she was still a graduate student at OSU. Her first conference was held in Ontario, and upon attending it, she was hooked. Beyond the many elucidating paper presentations and stimulating innovations being unveiled, she was grateful to be able to congregate with so many personal and professional peers. She was able to meet several who she considered giants in her field. And that alone encouraged her forward motion with a rejuvenated confidence.

Over the years, she has rolled up her sleeves and gotten to work on our behalf. In the process, she has magnified her presence as a reckoning force within floriculture and has carved out accolades and personal distinction. Virginia Walter became the first woman in the history of ASHS to chair a working group.

She has been featured in the publication Ball Redbook, considered to be the "bible" for the greenhouse industry, acknowledging her significant contributions to the field. She was honored to receive the Alex Laurie Research and Teaching Award. And there have been numerous other awards and recognitions for

her over the years. But, for her, the best reward is knowing that her generations of students have filtered through the ecosystem after having been under her tutelage. In that way, among others, she feels she has benefitted floriculture, horticulture, and the world in general.