Seasons

Autumn is my favorite time of year! I am a cool-season girl, so when the temperatures start to drop I am in my element. Add to that the change in color of the foliage, the migration of birds and butterflies, and the many animals that are out and about and I am in my “perfect” world. It reminds me of a song that was released in 1962 by the Limeliters and then made internationally famous by the Byrds in 1965 titled “To Everything There Is a Season”. The lyrics to this song came from the Bible (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8). The relevant lines to the song for this purpose are as follows:

“To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven:
A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, a time to reap that which is planted;”

As horticulturists, we are very aware of that cycle of life in the plants with which we work. I just know that the many plants that I have torn apart and dried to get root, shoot, and leaf dry weights will come back to capture me, take me apart, and dry me some day!

Throughout my career, I have noticed that issues of interest to the public cycle as well. The field of horticulture has ebbed and flowed in student enrollment to a great extent as concern about the environment has ebbed and flowed over time. As faculty, we worry about changes in enrollment and how declining enrollments will affect resources that come to departments as administrators make decisions on how to use extremely limited dollars.

Sometimes I worry that Horticulture is a low priority on the radar screen due to low student numbers (an international issue). In my department, we have stepped up student recruiting the past several years with little result. Thankfully, Seed Your Future is helping to identify ways in which we might change our thinking to better attract young people to our programs.

On my campus an internal study is being conducted on how to improve the research climate. I had the opportunity to go to a Town Hall meeting recently in which the committee overseeing the study was interested in hearing from tenured faculty about the challenges of doing research within our system and some potential solutions. I was surprised when a faculty member from Chemistry spoke up and said that during his career he had been in industry and at several universities. He was concerned that universities are leaning more and more to the business model. The business model in industry has been precarious at times due to the tendency to look at the now and not at the future. So to apply this to educational institutions, the concern is about current student numbers and not about the needs of the future. Thus programs with low enrollment tend to get fewer and fewer resources even though they have great impact on the future well-being of the world. Hmmm. That sounds kind of familiar in Horticulture.

Then another faculty member from Entomology spoke up and said that due to severe budget cuts over the past several years (my institution has had budget cuts of about 25% in state funding over the past three years), when faculty leave they are not replaced so their responsibilities get distributed among those faculty who remain. In his department about five faculty members have left in that time. How
can people who already have full-time loads take on the extra load of those departing faculty? His conclusion was that he felt like he was in a dying department.

Those two comments hit home for me as I think about my department and my chosen profession. Sometimes it feels like I am in a dying profession, but I hope that somebody will continue to produce the food that I eat every day! This feeling is particularly disturbing because as I look at the history of my institution, Horticulture was one of the first two departments on campus. Historically the need for horticulture has been recognized and horticulture has been embraced among land-grant institutions, but department mergers have made horticulture difficult to find in many institutions today.

At my institution, a consultant has been hired to study our webpages and determine how we can make them more user friendly. One of the findings is that horticulture extension materials are among the most commonly searched topics. It seems we have a disconnect between our three missions in how horticulture is valued.

I do not have a solution for this disconnect other than to keep our voice strong as we discuss our programs and needs with our administrators and our constituents. If anybody has insights into how to keep our voice strong, I would like to hear about them.

In closing, I apologize to those of you who have the song “To Everything There is a Season” stuck in your head. It has been stuck in my head for awhile now. I need to find something else to take its place!