Notes From the Chair... by Heiner Lieth

It is with great pleasure that I assume the role as Department Chair of the EH department. I have a strong commitment to all facets of Environmental Horticulture and have big plans. I would like to share some of my ideas with you.

Before I do that, though, I would like to introduce myself to those of you who do not know me. I was born in Germany and immigrated with my parents when I was a child. I grew up in North Carolina and got my college education at UNC-Chapel Hill. I received a PhD in Biomathematics from North Carolina State University working on development of mathematical models for plant growth. In 1984, after a postdoctoral research position in Texas, I was hired by the EH department at UC Davis to apply my mathematical modeling skills to horticultural situations. I have the title of “Crop Ecologist” and do research, teaching and extension. So I have now been doing this for 17 years, focusing my energies in greenhouse and nursery production of ornamental plants. If you want more detail on that, then you might look at my web site at lieth.ucdavis.edu.

During the 1990s the EH department encountered many retirements with few new faculty coming into the department. The net effect is that the faculty size is now half of what it was when I came to UC Davis. Much of this reduction occurred in bad economic times, so that it was impossible for the University to commit to regrowth of the department. In recent years however, it has become evident that the State of California desperately needs us. The floriculture industry has suffered significant reductions due to deteriorating ability to compete. The greenhouse and nursery industries currently face difficult environmental challenges, particularly in coastal areas. A lot of environmental pressures exists where we can be of help: e.g. vernal pools management, coping with salinity in the environment, development of drought tolerant landscape plants, etc. Furthermore, the continued growth in urban areas means that more and more demand exists for information related to urban horticulture.

During the time when I was candidate for the chair position, I spent a lot of time talking with the faculty and College administration about the direction of the department in the future. It was decided that we should have a particular focus and that this should be the following: (1) the development of horticultural methods to solve environmental problems and (2) development of sustainable horticultural methods that are environmentally sound. Dean van Allen recognized the value of this approach and is committed to the department’s growth. Thus, in the years to come, the EH department will be seeing significant growth.

This growth will be in two areas: production of ornamental crops and landscape/urban horticulture. Our goal is to achieve an international reputation in these areas where we will be known for the specialization in the focus area mentioned above. Some of our scientists would specialize in the area of greenhouse and nursery production, working with growers to develop best-management practices (BMPs) that are sustainable and environmentally sound. Others would be developing methods for managing urban landscapes including such specialized areas as restoration of disturbed sites and mitigation of specific environmental problems. Our goal would be to provide information to anyone in California needing information on urban horticulture.

The future for Environmental Horticulture is very exciting. We have numerous interesting projects in the works and we will be sharing information about these with you in the future.

There have also been interesting events in the lives of the folks that work here in EH. The following are some examples of what has been happening here in the department.

Student Happenings

Ph. D. candidate, Steve Wathen, who is working with Dr. Michael Barbour, received a grant of $2,500 from the Geological Society of America for use in his dissertation research on the long-term vegetation, fire, and geomorphological history of a high Sierra Nevada watershed. In addition, Steve received $6,000 worth of radiocarbon dating from Lawrence Livermore Laboratory to date cores taken from his study lake.

Summer Programs for High School Students

As is the case every summer, high school students from the region got to experience university life as part of three scholastic outreach programs- the Junior Academic Science Research Achievement Program (JASRAP), the Collegiate Academic Preparatory Science Research Achievement Program (CAPSRAP), and the UC Davis Young Scholars Program (YSP) supported by the National Science Foundation. These programs are designed to inspire talented students to achieve high educational goals. Several students were hosted by EH faculty this summer and made valuable contributions to various research projects. Dr. Alison Berry and doctoral student Rik Smith welcomed JASRAP student Judy Thao from North Highlands, CA to assist them in their study of cover-crop nitrogen dynamics in vineyards.

CAPSRAP participant Carla Christianson came from Galt, CA to help Dr. Michael Barbour’s students John Rusmore and Steve Wathen in their dissertation research projects. Dr. Richard Evans hosted YSP student Chithra Krishnamurthy from Fremont, CA who conducted experiments on nitrogen uptake in ornamental shrubs using a hydroponic system. YSP participant Madeline Christopher from Chico, CA worked in the lab of Dr. Michael Reid. Her research project involved the evaluation of Mirabilis jalapa (annual four-o’clock) as a model system for studying floral senescence. We hope these students enjoyed their time in our department and we wish them luck in their academic pursuits.

Faculty Activities

Dave Neale’s research group at the Institute of Forest Genetics was recently awarded a research grant in the amount of $1.8 million from the USDA. Their project is entitled: “Allele Discovery for Genes Controlling Economic Traits in Loblolly Pine”. Congratulations to Dave and his hard-working associates.

JASRAP student Judy Thao learns to operate the department’s nitrogen analyzer.

Staff Accomplishments

On June 27, the entire department celebrated the much-anticipated birth of twins to nursery technician, Mitch Bunch, and his wife, Yvonne. Boy Zachary and girl Lindsey are doing fine and keeping their parents busy.

Our principal superintendent of agriculture, Ron Lane, will be teaching a course in “Hydroponic Vegetable Production” for University Extension on September 27, 2001. The one-day class is geared toward commercial production and offers 6 continuing education credits.

Three venerable staff members received special longevity awards from the College. Those honored were Sandy Fielden and Glen Forister for 25 years of service, and Sherryl Fawx for 15 years.