


THE GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE FOLIAGE PLANT INDUSTRY IN FLORIDA

Verne Buck

Apopka

On the shores of Lake Eola back in 1912, something began to happen that was to greatly affect the whole state of Florida in much less time than the normal span of life.

Lake Eola, now a beautiful well-known lake in downtown Orlando, with its highly publicized lighted water fountain, once was the scene of an old abandoned pineapple slat shed.

In this old deteriorating shed, the Boston Fern Industry of Florida was begun in 1912 by Harry Ustler and Walter Newell. These were not cut ferns.

Two years later, they moved to Apopka and began to expand their production and shipping operation.

Ferns sold and sold well. The Industry continued to grow quite rapidly, especially after World War I. By 1925, there were over 100 Fern growers centered around the Apopka area. Production was up to hundreds of thousands a year. It was sometime in the early 20's that Apopka became known as the Fern City.

Let me pause a moment and tell you that many pages could be written of the old fern industry and even more pages could be written of the fantastic growth of the Foliage Plant Industry. It's not my intent to bore you with details, but I do want to say — that many of those pages could be humorous — many could also be heartbreaking, but nearly all could point out the courage and great effort and many contributions that were made to this great industry by the many leaders in this field of endeavor over the past 48 years.

Actually, the bust of the Florida Boom coupled with the Market Crash of 1929, put a damper on this production. The fern growers had already broadened their operations by growing not only the Boston Fern, but many other varieties of Ferns, many of which are no longer produced commercially. Some of the varieties were Asparagus Plumosus, Asparagus Sprengerii, Scotti, Roosevelt, Springfield, Wekiwa, Whitmani, Curly Compacta, etc. But even at the same time, a few other varieties of plants had made their appearance and were being tried out — Sansevierias, Peperomias, Pothos, Philodendron Cordatum, Nephthytis Liberica, Cryptanthus, Agaves, Crotons, etc., were in small patches here and there in various ferneries, as the slat sheds were then called.

As the popularity of ferns waned for various reasons, there began an ever increasing production of what are now termed Foliage Plants. More and more new varieties made their appearance — Cactus, Rubber Plants, Ophiopogon, Yucca, Euphorbia splendens, Aspidistra, Tradescantia, Ivy, Allamanda, Shrimp Plant, etc., were tried out. Crews were even sent into the swamps and woods to gather such items as Wild Cactus, Fly Catcher Plants and Water Hyacinths, and these were shipped North. It's a pity that they didn't clean out the Water Hyacinths at that time.

Even though many of the fern growers went out of business in the late twenties and early thirties, a few held on, even in spite of low prices, few sales and very little demand for their products. Many shipments went out at a low cash price — just so next week's payroll could be met. With hard work and a determined effort, they were able to carry on.
At one time, a Fern Growers Association was formed. Eventually, because of very hard times, not enough sales and dissention among the members, the Association dissolved.

Even so, there was a gradual increase of sales, acreage and production through the years 1935 to 40. This increasing growth was then once again slowed by war — World War II.

Actual figures are not obtainable, even from State Plant Board records, as to quantities of Foliage Plants grown, because nursery plants were not separated into these categories until quite recently. An estimate based on various calculations, would show that there were approximately twenty million ferns and foliage plants produced altogether, which may have returned in revenue to all growers, about $1 million in the year 1940. According to the best records we can find, there was only a slight increase of about 10% then through the year 1945. In 1945, business was then on the upswing over the entire nation. Also, it must have had a great effect on the plant business in Florida.

From 1945 to 1949, there was considerable expansion — roughly an increase of 30% in acreage, and sales more than doubled, for an increase of 100% from 1940 through 1949. On a survey conducted by the U. S. Dept. of Agriculture, it was estimated that sales of Foliage Plants on the wholesale level in Florida, rose to $2 million, excluding Ferns, for the year 1949.

In the years 1950 through 1955, a conservative estimate, based on the fantastic growth of the industry, would bring out a figure of a 400% increase, and arrive at over $1 million increase per year or up to an $8 million grand sales total at wholesale for the year 1955.

Tremendous expansion, more skilled growing and marketing conditions then contributed to the over-all picture. Indoor Foliage Plants were now becoming standard equipment in many homes and offices.

In 1956, sales again increased, this time to over $10 million. These actual sales figures were arrived at by a careful survey and personal interview with many of the growers. In 1957, sales again increased to an estimated $12 million or over.

180 Foliage Growers were using 549 acres of land under lath, Saran, or in open field production. Open field acreage had increased in the South Florida area to take care of such items as Sansevieria and Ficus Decora.

In addition, there were now 36 acres of greenhouses which had required the investments of huge sums of money. Remember, the first greenhouse had made its appearance in the Apopka area in 1937 at W. T. Champney’s & Son, and was first used for the production of Saintpaulia Violets. But Winter Garden Ornamental Nursery had a small glasshouse as early as 1932.

Actually, nursery production had increased from 271 acres in 1952 to 549 acres in 1957 — over 100% increase. At the same time, greenhouses had grown from slightly over 14 acres to 36 acres — up better than 120%. The next 2 years saw more growth and expansion, as well as a changing market.

The trend had started for larger and more expensive plant material a few years earlier, but 1958 and 1959 really saw these larger, higher priced items produced in large quantities. In fact, the total sales figures on specimen plant material alone is now very impressive.

I believe that if a careful survey were made and if all growers would respond with a truthful answer (They don’t have to answer like they were filling out an Income Tax Return) the total figures for 1959 would be in excess of $15 million.

This seemingly high figure is arrived at by allowing for recent expansion to come up to full production. That is, greenhouses are usually up to full production in the second year, with slat shed or Saran acreage varying in production even unto the third year. Also, many acres of full sun production started as early as 1955 and 1956, and so in 1959, were able to show outstanding gains in production.

1958 and 1959 saw a larger percentage of finished plant material shipped out at higher prices, due to the advent of nearly 100% swingover to light-weight plastic pots, the providing of better transportation, and public demand.

Many northern jobbers and wholesale growers were also enjoying a boom in plant sales. They didn’t have time to grow all their plants on to larger sizes and were taking delivery of more and more pot-grown or semi-established plants at higher prices. Production advantages in Florida were carefully weighed against
transportation costs to heavily populated market areas to decide whether to ship small plants or rooted cuttings to certain areas or to ship the finished plant material, etc.

Variety Stores and Grocery Chains really were out to sell plants in the year 1959, and a remarkable record was established. Many variety chains devote as much as 20% of their space to their Horticulture Department.

There are some who will argue with the estimated figure I have given, and it's true that $15 million is indeed a fantastic sum, but until proven different, I will stick to my guns and question any lower figure that is thrown my way.

I have not been asked to gaze into a crystal ball and forecast the future. However, intense competition is foreseen for the early 60's — It should and probably will stabilize the industry. It may even threaten the end of the inefficient producer and provoke the idea that remedial action should be taken. That is, steps to improve all of our operations; quality of plant material sent to market, realistic pricing procedures, scheduling of crops for seasonal high and low sales periods, product promotion, and public education for a broadened market, may soon be the rule rather than the exception.

But even as I stand here saying this, I'm sure there are growers who are very optimistic about the future. Well — aren't we all!

ESTABLISHING A CRITICAL LEVEL FOR AVAILABLE IRON FOR GARDENIAS WITH THE MODIFIED COMBER SOIL TEST

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Gardenias are popular with Florida gardeners because they bear quantities of beautiful, white, fragrant flowers amidst dark, waxy-green leaves. These shrubs are grown widely both as pot plants and as landscape specimens in all sections of Florida. Like azaleas, gardenias have their cultural problems (1), especially for the controlled need for iron. As with azaleas, when iron is deficient, gardenias are stunted, flowering is sporadic or suppressed, and foliage is chlorotic.

Iron deficiency is generally controlled by adjusting the soil reaction (2, 3, 10 and 11), with applications of iron in one of several forms to correct the inavailability of the element.

While working with Formosa azaleas, Edson and Watkins (5 and 6) developed a modified Comber soil test for available iron and used this to demonstrate the range of iron that would satisfy the needs of that popular landscape shrub. In the research reported herewith, the writers used the same test to study the range of iron required by gardenias and to establish the point at which chlorosis appears.

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MATERIALS AND METHODS

Gardenia plants (Gardenia jasminoides var. Veitchi), in pots and in landscape plantings, were employed in this experiment. A series of one-year-old potted gardenias was set in one-gallon clay pots with a mineral soil that contained about 8 percent organic matter. All pots were given equal treatments of proprietary fertilizer which contained a small amount of iron. Beginning with a control pot, increments of saturated limewater were added to each pot to establish a range in soil acidity from pH 4.0 to pH 7.0.

The pots were set out of doors and they were kept moist at all times. Chlorotic leaves appeared in the high-lime (alkaline) pots late in the third month. Leaves on plants in low-lime (acid) pots remained dark green throughout the experiment. Soil samples were taken and air dried for future testing. Soil samples were also taken from around chlorotic individuals and from under thrifty green plants in the same landscape planting.

PROCEDURE FOR SAMPLING AND TESTING

Soil sampling: Soil cores were taken vertically down to a depth of three inches with a small sampling tube. Composite samples were air-dried and passed through a 20 mesh screen.