

Back to school

In the Stone household, September is met with excitement and dread. For our two daughters — one a high school junior, the other in eighth grade — the emergence of yellow school buses, early alarm clocks and crisp fall air is mostly unwelcome. This long, hot summer has given way to classes, reuniting with friends and the bustle of academic life.

For me, it is the beginning of the college football season, where hope is constant and I try to get my girls to finally understand the Tampa 2 defensive scheme.

Year by year, the time goes by quickly. I have been OAN's executive director for five years and on staff with the association for a decade. Over that time, I have learned a lot about the industry and its people. I have seen how hard you work.

The people of Oregon's nursery industry have many tendencies that other sectors would do well to emulate, but the one that impresses me the most — the biggest constant — is the way you learn from one another. You are always going back to school.

Continuing education

If you get two nursery professionals together, they cannot help talking about plants, labor, shipping and whatever else comes to mind. Even though folks may compete for business, the ongoing sharing of industry tips and tricks never ends. We are always sharing new ways to perfect the craft of growing or selling plants. This continuing education may not always result in the logging of CEU credits, but it does improve our industry's overall performance.

I saw this firsthand during our annual lobbying trip to Washington, D.C. with OAN President Mike Coleman of Arrowhead Ornamentals and Government Relations Committee Chairman Josh Zielinski of Alpha Nursery.

We were visiting a pub near the U.S. Capitol at the end of the day. Josh and Mike got into a discussion about propagation, plant performance in certain areas of the country and a slew of plants only identified by their Latin names.

I slowly sipped a hop-infused beverage and watched them go. It was like being at a discussion with Albert Einstein and Stephen Hawking — and I was Homer Simpson. Each of them would say something profound and I would point to my belly and say, "Food goes in here."

But in all seriousness, their enthusiasm, vision and intelligence were easy to see. I watched it all with a deep appreciation for the craft of the trade.

This month, the OAN will conduct a series of tours up and down the Willamette Valley. These will allow our members to meet with federal and state elected officials and their staff. These tours expose policymakers to the ingenuity and the reality of our nursery operations.

While getting the ears of elected decision-makers is important, for many growers I know the real draw is being able to see the host nursery's approach to growing plants. Like mini caucus meetings, members congregate to talk shop. It is awesome.

Applied learning

The association is committed to the continuing education of the membership. While we've always had a plethora of offerings through the well-regarded Farwest Show seminars and other events, we heard from our members that they need information they can use right away.

So the seminars were retooled with the greenhouse manager, retailer and grower in mind. Top speakers in each field gathered at Farwest to give attendees what they asked for: real-time information that can be used tomorrow.

Under my predecessors, Clayton Hannon and John Aguirre, the association built a long history of discussing emerging topics of concern. This continues today. We continuously grapple with how to solve the problems facing the industry. Over the past several years, the association has offered traveling town halls on issues such as labor and preventing I-9 audits, best practices on pest and disease prevention, complying with the Affordable Care Act and its impact on your bottom line, and most recently, pollinator health.

Programs and manuals have also been created over the years to help those who need resources but may not be able to afford them on their own. During the height of the Great Recession, member-led LEAN training sessions helped the participants eliminate waste in their own operations and help other nurseries do the same.

When concerns about *Phytophthora ramorum* were impacting markets, the OAN brought together plant pathologists, faculty and researchers from Oregon State University and the U.S. Department of Agriculture. We obtained funding through the USDA Specialty Crop Block Grant Program to create a first-of-its-kind Safe Procurement and Production Manual. This book shows nurseries large and small how they can alter their production to stop pests and pathogens before they get widely established.

Since that time, we have continued to offer solutions and education that you can use.

A good business community is one that competes while acting as a good neighbor would. A great community is one that does those things and also shares its knowledge. I don't mean information that is passed from one generation to the next, like folklore. I mean sharing within the industry that is truly interactive.

Younger nursery owners can seek knowledge from experienced hands. But as techniques and technology change, the younger generation can also bring everyone else fully into the new frontier.

If we continue talking to one another, all of us will benefit. So as you hear and see all the references to back-to-school time, remember: it's not just for the kids. ☺



By Jeff Stone
OAN EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J Stone'.