

Proceedings First *Plant Propagators Society* Meeting

The group, assembled for the purpose of discussing the possibility and feasibility of organizing a Plant Propagators Society, and to listen to a fine program of skilled technicians was called to order by temporary chairman Edward H. Scanlon at 10 a.m. Mr. Scanlon welcomed the attendants to the meeting and then introduced Mr. Arthur L. Munson, Director of Properties for the City of Cleveland. Mr. Munson extended greetings from Mayor Thomas A. Burke and then proceeded to tell the gathering of his own interest in plant propagation. He concluded by assuring the group that a splendid opportunity for service lay within their grasp if they decide to put the meeting on an organized basis.

The first speaker on the formal program was then introduced by Chairman Scanlon—Mr. James S. Wells, Koster Nursery, Bridgeton, N. J.

The Plant Propagator—The Basis of Our Industry

By JAMES S. WELLS

Koster Nursery, Bridgeton, N. J.

I have often thought that the plant propagator is more closely akin to the medical profession than to any other, for surprisingly similar qualities are required both for the good doctor and the good plantsman. A long and rigorous initial period of training followed by slow and sometimes painful acquisition of knowledge through a lifetime devoted to his work are equally true of both. The comparison is even closer when one considers how much success may depend upon painstaking study, the careful consideration of all factors, before a diagnosis is given and treatment prescribed, for in both professions it is such attention to small intangible details that make the difference between success and failure.

The last twenty years has seen the business of the horticulturalist emerge from the "rule of thumb" era, even of superstition, to that of scientific certainty. The advances in horticultural knowledge represented by the introduction of "hormones," of new and highly lethal insecticides and fungicides can I suggest be accurately compared to the advances made in the medical profession by Lister and Pasteur. Even such a ritualistic item as the potting compost, which used to be so carefully prepared by the propagator himself according to his own pet formula has been shorn of its mystery and standard procedures prescribed which can enable any grower to obtain similar results year by year. With all these changes going on around him, the modern plant propagator has also altered. He has had to learn to use the new tools which science has made available to him, and must now combine considerable scientific skill with his practical down to earth knowledge in the intricacies of plant behavior and growth. He is part botanist, part scientist, part commercial grower, each part taking its rightful but subordinate place to his true love of plants. For this last, I think is the hallmark of the true plant propagator. He loves the plants with which he works—and nothing can give him greater pleasure than to see a fine well

grown batch of young healthy plants ready to leave his nursery and take their place in the adult world of landscape garden and home.

The plant propagator also acts as a very wholesome governor, so to speak, upon our daily work. With the advent of each new gimmick, or plant aid, we are usually given to understand that THIS will INDEED solve all our worries, and it is good for us to realize, through the quiet wisdom of the true plantsman that even if these new scientific aids are in themselves excellent—and I am not saying that they are not—they still are no substitute for the knowledge and skill which come only from a lifetime of living with and studying plants. It is today therefore that we see a slow transition of the old time gardener who depended mainly upon empirical knowledge and lore handed down from the dim past into the modern plant propagator, who, while still mainly relying upon his native sense of right and wrong, is able to take full advantage of modern scientific advances to increase his skills to make him into the highly trained craftsman that he is.

I would like to dwell for a moment, if I may, on this question of craft. It is well for us to consider that the craftsmanship and skill of the plant propagator is the very beginning of a long chain of events running through every phase of our industry. It is upon this skill, and upon nothing else quite so much, that all other parts of our great industry ultimately depend. Of what use would the landscape architect or the landscape constructor be to the home owner if no plants of any kind were available? Where would the florist obtain his flowers, his bulbs and seeds, and what could be the value of fertilizers, barrows, garden centers and garden magazines without plants? Webster's dictionary defines horticulture as the art of growing fruits, vegetables and ornamental plants. **AND ALL OF THESE—EVERYTHING GROWING IN FACT WHICH IS COVERED BY THE TERM HORTICULTURE, HAS TO ORIGINATE WITH THE PLANT PROPAGATOR. HE IS IN VERY FACT THE BASIS OF OUR INDUSTRY.**

Holding such a position as this, it says much for the character and integrity of the plant propagator that he has not wished to take advantage of the situation in any way. Many other groups of workers have thought it right to hold the rest of the community or the other members of their business fraternity to ransom in what they like to call their own best interests. Without going into the pros and cons of labor relations, we can look at the record with justifiable pride, for I believe there can hardly be another section of the nation which has such a clean record. The true plantsman has little time for such "goings on." He has more important things to do and just as long as he can make a reasonable living, see that his family is well provided for, then by far the most important thing to him is his work. In this day of machines and mass production, your plant propagator is one of the last and as yet unassailed strongholds of the true craftsman and this I suggest is the pivot upon which this meeting should depend, and upon which we should base our plans for the future existence of an organization. I would interject here that anything I have to say is of course my opinion only, and I put forward my suggestions purely as a basis for discussion.

As I wrote these notes last week, and thinking on the lines of craftsmanship, I looked up what the Encyclopedia Britannica had to say on the subject of crafts and guilds. The numerous craft guilds came slowly into being in Europe as industry developed. They were first referred to in the year 779 and by the early eight hundreds were quite general among the various industrial sections of France. From this country in the following three hundred years, the idea spread through Norway, Denmark and

Sweden, finally coming to England about the year 1000. The French of course took over England in 1066 and brought with them first-hand knowledge of the flourishing trade guilds then existing in their country and as a result the establishment of guilds in all sections of the industrial life of England then began and continued almost uninterrupted until 1835, at which time the special privileges of the guilds were formally abolished. Notwithstanding this, many of the old guilds still exist and flourish in England and on the continent, having their regular meetings and continuing their traditional practices which date back many centuries. These guilds had three very clear characteristics. The first was strong fraternal cooperation. This in fact was the prime reason for their coming into being. As trades became more organized workers in these trades recognized the benefits which would accrue from regular "get togethers" and the exchange of information on trade practices. The guilds therefore were primarily established to allow for this free exchange between members of the same trade. As they became more highly organized and as the industrial development of the country advanced they gradually took on two other functions, the first under the heading of corporate solidarity and the second Christian brotherhood. The guilds became the arbiters of conduct within the guild and set up a code of ethics and above all a standard of excellence by which a man could be judged. They established the number of years of training for an apprentice, the standard of skills required before he became a journeyman and finally a master at his trade, and in general saw to it that the high degree of integrity, craftsmanship and skill associated with their guild was maintained.

One of the questions which we are here to decide is whether we should set up an organization of plant propagators and if so what form should it take. I am keenly in favor of this being done, because I feel that nothing but good could come from this both for the individual members and for the industry as a whole. And it here of course that we immediately run into thorny problems, the most important of which is certainly "Who would be eligible for membership?" As a basis for discussion, I would like to make the following suggestions:

1. That the requirements for full membership should be stringent and should reflect an extremely high standard both of ethics, skill and experience.
2. That full membership should be preceded by a period as a noviate during which time the prospective member can have ample opportunity to demonstrate his knowledge and skill and his willingness to abide by the rules of the guild.

What then should be the requirements of full membership? I would suggest these:

1. At least 10 years active and practical experience in the art of plant propagation.
2. A high standard of integrity in the community and the trade. This should be vouched for by not less than four people of similar standing.
3. A ready willingness to freely share his knowledge and skills with other members.

It is hard to try to assess which of these three would be considered most important, but a willingness to share with others would quickly show whether knowledge and experience were there, while the very act of sharing would suggest integrity. I think, therefore, that this last should be considered of paramount importance. It is unfortunate that many growers do

not subscribe to this idea of free exchange of information which they have perhaps acquired after much time, trouble and expense. There are arguments which they can put forward, based entirely upon the commercial aspects of these matters to support their views but I would strongly urge that we, as a group of craftsmen, would place ourselves above the almighty dollar, and we should take every possible precaution to see that people who are mainly concerned with what they can get out of the organization, and not one bit concerned with what they may contribute, should be rigorously excluded. We should have no time for the highly commercialized dollar grabber whose one idea is to try to steal a march on his competitors, but we should welcome with generous warmth the man who believes he knows a little and is willing to share what he knows with men of similar mind.

I would therefore suggest that any person who can satisfy the first two requirements—10 years experience, plus a high communal and trade standing vouched for by four people—should immediately be admitted to novice membership, and that for such a person to qualify for full membership, he should produce some tangible proof of his willingness to share with his fellow members. This might take a number of forms but the most readily acceptable would probably be an address, preferably illustrated, showing results obtained from some original method or technique of plant propagation. This might be presented to a meeting such as this—and if we organize, I would hope that we would be able to have at least an annual meeting for the express purpose of hearing such addresses—or it might be presented to different chapters if they finally come into being. Each address should be carefully considered by a committee set up for this purpose and if (and only if) the information given is of sufficient merit, then the person should receive the privilege of full membership in the Plant Propagators Guild. Full membership should be an honor and a prize which has to be won, not handed out on a platter. Full membership in the plant propagators guild should stamp its recipient as a master craftsman in his trade, as a man of unusual ability, integrity and skill, and who has demonstrated for all to see that he is more concerned with the long term advancement of the horticultural industry than with the short term commercial advantages that might perhaps accrue from the close guarding of the knowledge he may have.

To recapitulate—I would like to suggest that before we leave Cleveland, we bring into being a Guild of Plant Propagators. Our charter should have as its three foundation stones those which have stood the test of the centuries in similar organizations in Europe.

1. Strong fraternal co-operation for the good of all
2. Corporative solidarity
3. Christian brotherhood.

and with these ideas in mind, we should set up an organization having as its goal the establishment of the plant propagator as a recognized craftsman in this industry and the free dissemination of knowledge through proper channels to the final benefit of all.

Now I realize that these ideas are controversial and shortly we shall have an opportunity of airing our opinions. But no one has any use for a person who preaches one thing and does another, so I have brought along a few slides to illustrate one phase of our work on propagation which occupied much of my time for the past four years, and which I would like now to show to you. They deal exclusively with the propagation of hybrid Rhododendrons from stem cuttings and I will briefly run through them making a few comments as we go along.