

The Uniqueness of IPPS and Why We Need it[©]

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INTRODUCTION

To understand why I believe we need the unique organization that is IPPS, you need to know a little of how it has helped shape my horticultural life.

In the early spring of 1965 I had just finished 3½ years of service in the Danish Army. Before that I had completed a four year apprenticeship in nurseries in Northern Jutland in Denmark and in the Copenhagen area. After a year at the Vilvorde Horticultural School I had graduated with a diploma in 1961.

In March of 1965 I boarded a steamer in Copenhagen, with a suitcase, a footlocker and a wooden crate. I was bound for America to see the world, learn more about my trade, and then come home to Denmark to start a nursery. Little did I know that it would be in America where I would start that nursery.

My destination was the old D. Hill Nursery in the village of Dundee, north west of Chicago where my boss to be, Jack Hill, picked me up at the railway station. We loaded my luggage into his car and drove out of the city on motorways such as I had never seen.

The arrangements for the job had been made with the help of Anton Thomsen from the Thomsen Nursery in Skalborg by Aalborg in Denmark. I knew that I was to become a “supervisory trainee” for a year — in the propagation division.

I soon learned that the propagator would be leaving at some point and that I, if I was worth something, would be taking over his job. What nobody had told me was that his 1 year notice was up in 4 months and he was committed to a job in another nursery. So 4 months after I arrived, I had the choice of taking over as propagator and manager of the whole propagation division — with an acre (0.4 ha) of greenhouses, 10 acres (4 ha) of outdoor frames, and 30 acres (12 ha) of stock plants — right away, or finish the year of training but with nobody to train me.

I choose the first option and now found myself with responsibilities in many ways far higher than I had as an army engineer platoon leader — and with things I knew far less about. The old propagator, who was leaving, was very helpful. He lived about an hour’s drive away, and I now found myself driving to his place every 2 weeks and spending an evening with him learning what I should do next. If it had not been for that and my military experience — and what was about to come from IPPS, I would never have made it.

In December of that first year, Jack Hill took me to the Eastern Region IPPS conference in Cleveland. Jack Hill, my boss, was good to introduce me to many of the 400 to 500 plant propagators, professors, and scientists attending from half of America. I sat through the lectures and went on the tours. In the breaks and the evenings over a beer and on the tours, I was welcomed. Propagators and professors took me under their wings and were helpful in a way I had never experienced. I made connections.

And of course I became a member of the IPPS. But that was not so easy in those days. You had to have three sponsors who were already members. I had my boss and a propagator I had met in Minnesota, Dick Cross, who in turn said he would get Mr. Vincent Bailey from the famous Bailey Nurseries to sign for me — so we found Mr. Bailey. He said that he could not just do such a thing — he didn’t know if I knew anything about plants and propagation. So I ended up in a 20 min. examination by Mr. Bailey. I must have passed, because he then signed me up.

So I was “hooked” and helped by the IPPS. In the almost 50 years since, I don’t think I have missed more than four or five conferences. My boss, Jack Hill, never came to a conference again. He said now I was the company’s man in IPPS. Jack Hill became involved in politics and sadly was killed in an accident a few years later. And I came to be the propagator at the D. Hill Nursery for several years.

WHAT IS SO UNIQUE ABOUT IPPS

The IPPS is a strange mix of practical plant propagators, professors, and scientists that seldom come together under other circumstances. They respect each other and learn from each other in a most unusual way. They listen together, tour together, share a meal and a drink together, and exchange information all the time.

There was an acceptance and welcome of young people without much experience to a degree I have not seen anywhere else. Nobody asks how rich you are or how big your father's nursery is. We are all together about plant propagation and plant growing. There is an opportunity to meet and learn from the top people in academia, botanical gardens and arboretums, and commercial nurseries the like of which you rarely find.

There is an opportunity to build networks with plant propagators, plant growers, and plant business people, not just in your area but throughout a good part of the world. And then there is the *Proceedings* — the “Black Book” — with all the lecture papers since the start in 1951. Of course it is now also on a CD-ROM disc and can all be had on the internet.

This brings me to one of my pet subjects. Many people nowadays think they can get all they need from the internet: no need to be a member of an association or go to meetings, classes and conferences as all can be had on the screen in the propagation house, the office or at home. I don't dispute that the internet is a wonderful tool, faster, and more efficient than a stack of black books, or green books or whatever. It is, nevertheless, a tool to help us accomplish our task of producing good and valuable plants. To do real things and become real people, we have to interact with real people. That is what we do at IPPS gatherings. To sit and have a drink and share some thoughts with your computer is just not the real thing.

A NURSERY OF ONES OWN

In time my wife and I started our own nursery, Midwest Groundcovers, not in Denmark but in America. John Wilde, the old propagator who became my mentor in plant propagation, was very helpful in this.

From the early years of growing and selling only groundcovers, we have come to produce a wide spectrum of landscape and garden plants. Even the plants that the farmers ploughed under when they broke the prairie, have now become landscape and preservation plants.

In the early years of our nursery, when things were much tighter than they are today, we started to take our young people to the IPPS conferences. We feel, and they feel, that has tremendously enhanced the growth and quality of our business.

At one IPPS conference in Norfolk, Virginia, I found myself sitting at the bar with IPPS founder Jim Wells. Jim asked about my new nursery. I answered that it may never become more than a “one-and-a-half-man” business, but we were going to try. Jim said, make it a two-man business and I asked why? He replied, because otherwise you can never get away — and you need that sometimes. There was a lot of truth to that. We also talked about financing and I expressed concern that the banks would not take plant inventory as collateral. Jim suggested that I seek out the local branch of the Farm Credit System and this connection became a key to the growth of Midwest Groundcovers.

Over the years as I became more and more involved with the IPPS, I have written articles in the newsletter and given papers to conferences. I have served on and chaired committees and served on the Eastern Region North America Board to become its President. This was great learning in dealing with many kinds of people — to get the job done. Later I served on the International Board and became its President. There were great years of traveling to conferences and excursions around the world. It was an invaluable experience and sometimes challenging, to work with all the different nationalities and cultures. We have brought so much back home, of ideas and inspiration, that all has been paid for many times over.

Can there be any doubt that we need IPPS, now and in the future? I don't think so!