

NEW YORK FRUIT QUARTERLY

Editorial

The Future of the New York Fruit Extension Team

One of the great strengths of the New York State fruit industry is the Cooperative Extension System made up of field specialists and on-campus faculty. Over the last 30 years, we have had the benefit of specialized field extension agents who have helped the fruit industry much more than general agriculture agents could have. Our system is viewed as the model system by the rest of the world. Our field extension specialists have national and international recognition as the best field extension team around. However, the current system is under severe budgetary pressure at both the county extension association and the college level and is probably not sustainable in its current funding format. The fruit extension system needs careful and thoughtful deliberation by the fruit industry and the college to develop a plan for the next five years.

It appears to me that there are two possible courses of action:

- 1) Downsize the fruit extension team as funds are lost at the county and college level;
- 2) Develop new innovative funding sources to support the team.

The first option would seriously weaken the technical support system Cornell and the county extension associations provide the fruit industry. It is exactly what has been happening in many other parts of the world. Extension systems in New Zealand, the UK, and Holland were dramatically downsized over the last 15 years and, in those three countries, the public extension systems disappeared. Public extension specialists were replaced in part with private consulting companies which work with the larger growers but, for many of the other growers, there has been a significant void in the support they receive. The kinds of events our growers have come to rely on such as annual pruning demonstrations, winter fruit schools, spring thinning meetings, on-farm research and demonstration plots, summer field tours, preharvest meetings, trouble shooting visits and proactive education programs have disappeared in those countries. Growers there look at our system with envy and tell us "don't let your extension system disappear."

The second option of developing new innovative funding sources to support our field extension system offers a much better future for the New York fruit industry. Currently, the funding that county extension associations provide is the backbone of our field extension system. First, we must continually support them within the political system of each county to maintain as much of the county funding as possible. Without the counties, the whole system would collapse. However, the continual budget pressure county extension associations are facing means that over the long term they will only be able to fund a smaller portion of the cost of the extension system than they do now. This budget gap is where the industry needs to focus its collective efforts.

What possible sources of funding might the industry pursue to meet this budget gap? The first option is greater state funding. An effort needs to be pursued by the organizations representing the growers: the New York State Horticultural Association, the NY Farm Bureau, the NY Apple Association, the NY Berry Growers Association, the NY Summer Fruits Growers, the NY Pear Growers, and the NY Wine and Grape Growers. What is the state willing to invest in the extension support system to keep New York fruit growers competitive and profitable? Relatively small amount of state dollars will help stabilize the current system.

A second source of funds is the industry itself. What are growers willing to pay to keep the outstanding system we currently have? What are the fruit processors in the state willing to pay? What are the fresh packers and shippers willing to pay? What are the New York state retailers willing to pay to keep the excellent extension support system in place to keep New York growers on the cutting edge of fruit production?

A multi-source funding system of county extension associations, Cornell University, the State of New York and the fruit industry itself ought to be developed. If properly implemented, it will stabilize the fruit extension system in New York and strengthen the New York fruit industry. Let's work together to get it done.

Terence Robinson
Chair of the Cornell Fruit Program Work Team

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FRONT COVER: Hydrocooling and special plastic bags that give modified storage atmosphere can help extend the storage life of fresh sweet cherries for four weeks. Photos by Jim Wargo.

BACK COVER: Lapins sweet cherries that were stored in modified atmosphere packages for four weeks had green stems and better fruit quality than conventionally stored cherries. Photos by Jim Wargo.

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