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Series 4: Issues in Maine's Natural Resources Industries

Opportunities and Challenges for Maine Horticultural Industry

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For the last two decades, the horticultural industry in Maine and nation-wide has been fast-growing and dynamic sector of the American agricultural economy, averaging an annual increase of 5.5-12.1% increase in revenue. American households spent \$30 billion in year 2000 on plants, supplies, and other horticultural products. Nearly \$30 billion was spent on the turf industry. In the state of Maine, a recent economic survey showed that Maine horticulture (not including the turf industry) generated over \$286 million sales per year with 88% of that revenue received by Maine-based companies. Maine horticulture includes over 750 firms, employing more than 10,000 Maine citizens. The industry keeps over 13,000 acres in agricultural production and generates \$20 million in taxes.

Currently, horticulture in Maine includes the following businesses, i.e. garden centers, wholesale production nurseries, landscape companies, arborists, florists, greenhouses, Christmas tree farms, turf and golf course management firms and hybrids of any number of above. Although each entity has its own professional organization, an umbrella group called the Ornamental Horticulture Council (OHC) was formed to represent needs of all of the above groups. Its mission is to assess common needs of the diverse horticultural groups in Maine and act on these needs. The University of Maine has worked closely with OHC on this mission.

However, the horticultural industry is a global business. More than 95% of Maine horticultural businesses are "Mom and Pop" operations that have to face stiff challenges from chain stores and international competition. To survive in today's economy, Maine horticulture must develop niche

markets. Maine has a great potential for developing new horticultural crops and products. We have to work hard to bring our horticultural products to the markets so that we can gain the market share. An example is vegetative propagation of the native Maine plant, Sweet Fern. Research at the University of Maine helped Maine develop methods for Maine growers to propagate this wild plant, and this year 80,000 plants were sold throughout the United States and Canada.

Challenges

Growing plants in Maine has many challenges. To select plants for Maine landscape depends highly on the cold hardiness research. The University of Maine cold hardiness studies have provided a lot of information for nursery growers and their customers. Recent trials on Mountain Laurel and Atlantic Whitecedar in the Lyle E. Littlefield Gardens concluded that 5 cultivars of Mountain Laurel could be grown in Zone 4 (central Maine) and 12 more cultivars for Zone 5 (southern Maine). For Atlantic Whitecedar, more than 20 cultivars could be grown in Maine and six of them have great landscape appearances under our natural conditions. Other research includes how to propagate native plants for commercial uses and natural conservation, new plant production for Maine, overwinter on newly rooted cuttings, and nutrients in hanging baskets, and etc. Obviously, these research projects not only provide technical guidance for growers, but also increase the confidence of both growers and customers. With better understanding and application of our research findings, the horticultural industry, sponsored by the ORC, created a research endowment fund (target \$2 million) to support horticultural research performed in Maine.

"This fund will enable faculty, staff, and students at the University of Maine to better fulfill their research requirements, and provide long-term support to the existence of the

Lyle E. Littlefield Gardens, a world-known research facility at the University of Maine,” said Jeff O’Donal, the president of OHC.

Horticulture is regulated by the Maine Department of Agriculture. However, in many existing laws and regulations, horticulture is not included as a defined agricultural commodity. Therefore, many laws favoring agriculture, such as sales tax exemptions and environmental regulations, do not support horticulture as agriculture. This practice could be changed and the inequality should be eliminated. The state could create a statutory definition of agriculture in Maine that specifically includes horticulture.

Exiting Time for Maine Horticulture

This is an exciting time for horticulture in Maine. Under the industrial leadership of the Ornamental Research Council and technical support of The University of Maine researchers, the fast-growing horticultural commodity can reach new stages and better contribute to Maine agricultural economy. The marketing promotion project, “Plants for ME,” is a great example to sell the horticultural products to a larger audience. With better funding and favored legislation from the state of Maine, the University of Maine could provide unparalleled help in managing the fast-growing horticultural industry with professional organizations, like ORC and Maine Landscape and Nursery Association.

New and quality horticultural crops are the new blood for the horticultural industry and the potential market is essential for the success of horticultural commodity. The University of Maine will work closely with the horticultural industries on these projects.

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