

Meister speaks to vegetable growers

HERSHEY—Horticulture is a broad term including fruits, vegetables, flowers and ornamentals, both outdoor and greenhouse production, explained Richard T. Meister, at a recent Vegetable Growers Conference. It includes also direct to consumer marketing and U-pick which is growing rapidly.

The outlook for commercial horticulture is super, he said. It has never been better, on the demand side. Commercial horticulture is coming into its own, as consumers are turning more and more to the natural nutritive values in fruits and vegetables and the aesthetic qualities in plants and flowers around their home or on their apartment balconies.

Last year the American Society for Horticultural Science celebrated its 75th anniversary. ASHS was referred to by Meister as the research arm of the horticultural industry.

ASHS was founded by such horticultural greats as Liberty Hyde Bailey and U. P. Hedrick. These leaders laid the groundwork for the horticultural industry with their visions, knowledge, and encouragement.

Back in 1903, when the Society for Horticultural Science was founded there was a very different social and economic climate than today. The emphasis was on

technology of production and there was considerable assistance from federal and state governments and the tone of public opinion was very supportive and favorable. Leading horticulturists were looked up to and glamorized.

Horticulture exists in a vastly different climate today. For instance, the environmental movement has had a considerable effect on commercial horticulture, Meister said.

"There has been a remarkable increase in students studying horticulture — a fantastic seven-fold increase," he said. "Many of these students are young women who will take jobs in nurseries, garden stores, orchards and vegetable farms, or with companies supplying growers."

"Why this surge in enrollment? Because of interest in the environment and in quality of life and because agriculture has achieved a new social status in our society."

There has been a similar remarkable increase in interest in fresh fruits and vegetables as being "natural" foods with health giving nutritive qualities, Meister added. "Take salad vegetables, for instance. New records of consumption are being set. And now there are moves by large corporations to industrialize the

tomato and lettuce, too, with what is called high yielding indoor farms using artificial lighting, artificial soil, and an artificial climate enriched with CO₂."

Add to this, population growth figures which show a steady increase in demand coming for fruits and vegetables. The Bureau of Census predicts a 4% growth in demand by 1990 and a handsome 14% by 1990.

The greenhouse part of horticulture has been growing also. A relatively new thing is selling bedding plants in pots instead of plant packs for instant gardens. A California grower sold 30 million annuals in 4-inch pots.

Direct sales to consumers at roadside markets or farmers markets or with pick-your-own programs are also growing which restores local market control. "You are not at the mercy of some far-off market," Meister said.

From the time ASHS was organized in 1903 until 1930, the emphasis was on production. The objective in our national life was to build factories and farms and railroads and highways and, most of all, new technology, Meister said.

But in the thirties, because of the great depression and the breakdown in the banking system, the emphasis shifted to demand. Everyone talked about

finding ways to stimulate demand and until the seventies the government led the way in demand stimulation and management through government spending, tax reduction, and welfare programs.

These demand programs affected commercial horticulture by putting money in people's pockets to improve their diets with wholesome fruits and vegetables. Also by making it possible for people to buy homes and move to the suburbs and plant ornamentals and flowers.

At the same time, the foundation for horticultural research, laid in the previous decades, began to pay off and new technology made possible year round supply of perishable fruits and vegetables, new varieties, and new methods and ways which have culminated in today's dynamic, productive, and flexible horticultural industry.

Starting in the late sixties and the seventies, we began to enter a new era, Meister went on.

"It is now apparent that national policies based on demand have serious weaknesses resulting in inflation, a weakened

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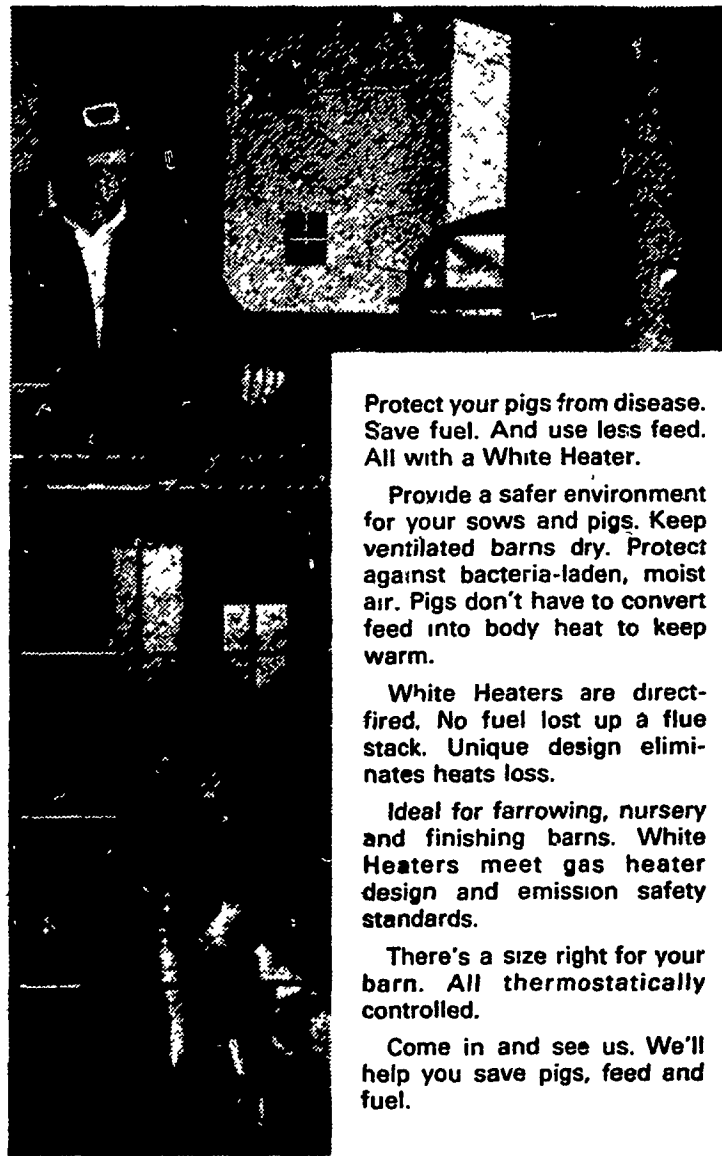
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