Exploring our Roots: A Brief(er) History of Extension

Editor’s note: Exploring our Roots is an excerpt first written by Bob Kellam for the North Carolina Extension Master Gardeners Volunteer Association Newsletter. It was later condensed and published again as a blog for the Master Gardener Program by Karen Jeannette. The link to her blog (which goes into much finer detail) can be found at the end of the article.

It wasn’t so long ago that about half the U.S. population lived on farms. Now only about 2% of us do, and only 17% live in what are called “rural areas”. In the latter part of the 19th century, agriculture in America is an unproductive system, built on tradition, superstition, and backbreaking toil. Families spend as much as 40% of their income on food, and the disparity between the quality of life on the farm and life in the city is getting larger, with a considerable proportion of the former suffering from poverty and illiteracy. Most farmers are suspicious of the new techniques being developed by the fledgling USDA, referring to them as “book farming.” As a result, productivity is down, soils are being depleted in as few as 5 years, and food prices are going up.

Early in President Lincoln’s first term, Congress passes the “Organic Act” which formed USDA and the Morrill Act of 1862, which establishes “Land Grant” universities in each State to educate citizens in agriculture, home economics, mechanical arts, and other practical professions. The idea of a “land grant” is actually a practice we borrowed from Europe, in which the government provides a grant of federal land to be used for a specific purpose, or which can be sold to raise funds for that purpose. The implementation of the law leads to the formation of the North Carolina College of Agriculture and Mechanical Arts in 1887 and its first class matriculates in 1889.

Enter one Seaman A. Knapp, felt by many to be the father of Extension. He is a physician by training, a college instructor, and comes to farming late, but is impressed by the new farming techniques being developed in Michigan and Iowa. In 1902, he’s dispatched to Texas to start a demonstration farm to help combat the cotton boll weevil. The farm is a successful cooperative venture with local farmers and the idea quickly spreads across the South.

In 1908, to promote some of the new growing practices, NC State signs a memorandum of understanding with USDA to start Farmers Boys’ Clubs, the forerunner of 4H. In 1911, Jane S McKimmon is hired to develop girls’ “Canning Clubs” and “Tomato Clubs” in response to an epidemic of food poisoning, due in large part to poor food preservation practices. This focus on youth is largely motivated by the USDA’s repeated failure to persuade older farmers to adopt better practices. USDA begins to realize that raising a new generation of farmers more open to improved techniques may be part of the solution.

The growing success of these programs leads to the passage in 1914 of the Smith-Lever Act, also known as the Extension Agriculture Act. Smith-Lever is designed “to aid in diffusing among the people of the United States, useful and practical information on subjects relating to agriculture and home economics, and to encourage the application of the same.” The Act forms a partnership between the USDA and the land grant universities to extend the practical applications of research through demonstrations at the county level (that’s us!) and requires the states to match federal funding on an equal basis.
Michelle recently accomplished the following activities:

- Our new Master Gardener class toured the Tropical Fruit Grove and Plant Diagnostic Clinic at the University of Florida, Tropical Education and Research Center, in Homestead. A great opportunity to connect our new group to the resources available through the University of Florida. The incoming class of volunteers has 20 participants and they will be a resource for all areas of the Keys.

- Michelle will be speaking to the Key West Garden Club about Managing Yard Pests Responsibly on March 7th at 1:30 p.m. at the Pavilion at West Martello Tower, 1100 Atlantic Boulevard, Key West. The event is free and open to the public.

- Master Gardeners, Kitty Somerville and Hazel Hans, organized a native plant ID walk along the Cudjoe portion of the Overseas Heritage Trail.

- National Invasive Species Awareness Week is February 25th through March 3rd, 2019! Michelle wrote a blog post, Invasive Species Invade Paradise, which was also sent to the media. Find more information about the blog on page 4 of the newsletter!

The Monroe County Master Gardeners will help you with plant problems or insect identification at the following locations throughout the spring:

**KEY WEST**
Gato Building / Extension Office  
1100 Simonton Street, #2-260  
9:00 a.m. to 12 noon  
March 4th and 18th  
April 1st and 15th  
May 6th and 20th

**MARATHON**  
Marathon Home Depot  
4555 Overseas Highway  
9:00 a.m. to 12 noon  
March 16th  
April 20th  
May 18th

**KEY LARGO**
Murray E. Nelson Government & Cultural Center / Extension Office  
102050 Overseas Hwy., #244  
9:00 a.m. to 12 noon  
March 6th and 20th  
April 3rd and 17th  
May 1st and 15th

Shelly recently accomplished the following activities:

- Shelly held a training for the Stony Coral Tissue Loss Disease at Captain’s Corner and taught 7 participants, including members of Force Blue, how to identify the 11 species of corals that are early infected with the disease. SCTLD has spread to Key West and the training will help managers mark the progress of the disease and recovery in the Florida Reef Tract.

- Shelly taught students at Florida Keys Community College Coral Ecology course about the importance of sponges in the local marine environment. Dr. Alex Brylske has added sponges to the course curricula and this is the second time Shelly has presented to his class.

- Shelly co-chaired the Estuarine and Coastal Health Initiative Work Action Group for Florida Sea Grant in St. Petersburg for 22 attendees to develop a liability waiver for citizen science volunteers through UF General Council and the identified action items for 2019.

- Shelly assisted Bo Boudart, a film-maker from the Bahamas, on a Queen Conch documentary about the impacts of the fishery closure in the 1970s in the Florida Keys in anticipation of new management measures for queen conch in the Bahamas.

- Shelly continues to contribute to the weekly conference calls for the multi-agency effort for Stony Coral Tissue Loss Disease led by FDEP, NOAA, and FWC on the management committee and the engagement committee.
Smith-Lever is still considered one of the most responsible and ingenious pieces of legislation ever passed by Congress. It provides the authorizing legislation to create an Extension presence at the county level and does so by shared funding with state and local governments. The things that the implementers of the Morrill, Hatch, and Smith-Lever Acts learned in translating these laws into effective programs can be distilled down to a simple statement: If you want to persuade people to undertake something, the effort needs to be: responsive to a recognized need or issue; cooperative and interactive; practical, well-demonstrated, and service oriented. Throw in unbiased, research-based information and include a focus on youth, and you pretty much have the core principles of Extension.

If we focus on the underlying principle of Extension as improving the quality of American life, then the periodic adjustment and recalibration of our goals is wholly consistent with a research-based organization.

And, throughout its history, the guiding philosophy of Extension has remained unchanged: a strong belief in the equality of individuals, the possibility of change and progress, the reliability of scientific information, and the power of education.

The rest of Karen Jeanette’s blog and excerpts from Mr. Kellam’s “Exploring our Roots” may be found here: https://mastergardener.extension.org/2013/04/exploring-our-roots-a-short-history-of-extension-and-the-master-gardener-program/
February 25th—March 3rd is National Invasive Species Awareness Week!

Our Environmental Horticulture Agent, Michelle Leonard-Mularz, put together a blog post, *Invasive Species Invade Paradise*, to help you sort out what is invasive in your yard and how to deal with it.


**UF/IFAS/MCES QUARTERLY CONTACTS**

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