

Fruit News April 2017

As we begin the 2017 Spring Twilight Meeting Series and we host the Lancaster County meeting on our farm, I think back to all the information I've garnered and friendships I've formed over the past 25 plus years at these meetings. While it's invaluable to get current and accurate pest control and horticultural advice from the Penn State experts, it's also a great time to share the trials and tribulations associated with our industry with fellow growers. Let's face it, fruit growing isn't for wimps, and misery loves company. We can all appreciate gathering together for a little spring boost after hours on the sprayer and tramping a bunch of trees into the soil. We might even complain a little bit about the weather.

26 years ago on June 1st I began my management duties at the Masonic Village. I was in my twenties and fresh out of college, trying to figure out how to manage a fruit farm and farm market. I had a great formal education and I spent my formative years helping do just about everything involved with fruit production on my family farm, but I always had a professor or family member to guide me along the way. Being on my own as the decision maker was a difficult challenge. A challenge I thought I was ready for until the first week on the job when I had to hire enough strawberry pickers to pick ten acres of berries that were already ripe, make a budget with numbers I wasn't familiar with, settle an employee dispute before it came to blows, and figure out why the manager before me had planted four acres of asparagus.

In the early nineties as a twenty something I would sit in the meetings at the Mid Atlantic Fruit and Vegetable conference in Hershey with my college buddy and we would look around the room and wonder if we were going to be the only ones left to run farms in the future. Everyone in the room had grey hair (if they had hair), seemed to be sixty or older, and some of them snored during the presentations. It was a lonely feeling for those of us who were chomping at the bit to make our mark in the business. There weren't many peers our age to commiserate with. We wondered aloud about the future of the industry.

In the early 2000's my friend and I started to notice something new at the Hershey meetings. Young people, even younger than us! How exciting. A breath of fresh air for the industry. Then in 2005 I heard someone mention the formation of a new group of young growers called the Young Grower's Alliance. There was a resurgence in the industry of younger growers coming back to the farm and they were joining forces, if for nothing else to complain about the older generation and how they were stuck in their ways. I did add my name to the roster, but by that time I was in my late 30's and my management days were in full swing. Getting away from the farm to join in on the excitement proved to be nearly impossible, but I was still excited that this group had formed and the future of the fruit industry once again looked viable.

Jump forward to 2017. The Young Grower's Alliance is now over 300 members strong and hail from Pennsylvania and surrounding states. The members have been quoted as saying they are gaining education while building personal relationships along the way. There is now a Penn State Extension position that is charged with coordinating and advising the group. YGA organizes workshops to help young growers attack the challenges they will face in their horticultural career like diversification, marketing, production techniques, recruiting and farm

transition planning. They visit many farming operations, packing houses, and research trials during the year. They take annual road trips across the country to learn more about the fruit industry. This year they will tour Rock Springs Research station at PSU, Butler's and Water's Orchards in Maryland, and attend the IFTA Summer Study Tour in Michigan. In the past there have been international destinations as well. For the past several years YGA has hosted one of the premiere workshops during the first day of the Mid Atlantic Fruit and Vegetable Convention. What a difference from those lonely conventions in the 1990's. Learning your business, learning to lead, connecting with peers, what more could you ask for as a young grower.

OK, I'll admit I am a little jealous. I wish YGA existed when I was young enough to be an active member so I could have experienced the peer to peer information sharing. I am now watching these young people turn into leaders in the fruit industry, and I'm just happy to be a mentor when the need arises. They are serving in positions on the SHAP board, SHAP committees, taking over leadership positions on their home farms, and creating unique opportunities for their farms and our industry to be successful in the future. I am ecstatic that our younger generation has a place to gather and peers to lean on to help shape them into the next generation of leaders in the fruit growing industry.

If you are a young grower, or there is a young grower in your family between the ages of 18 and 35, make sure check out the YGA website and join the email list-serv. Membership is free. <http://agsci.psu.edu/frec/yga>. You can participate as much or as little as you want, but getting to know your industry peers is invaluable in everyone's life. One YGA member was heard saying "On a personal level, I learned to feel excited about my career choice, which is about the best thing that can happen to a young adult". As industry professionals, we should want nothing less for the next generation of fruit growers in order to maintain the viability of the industry.

Wishing your snowball bloom turns into a record breaking crop,
Tad

Tad Kuntz
SHAP President