

Remarks for the C.P.E.S. 100 year anniversary horticulture breakfast.

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The Horticulture Department began with the hiring of Otis Woodard in 1921, the station's second staff member following the appointment of Director Starr in 1919. Otis remarked that when he arrived there was not much to be found except some stumped over land, a small cottage that looked deserted, and a barn that with some fixing up might be serviceable. The barn was leveled by a tornado that night. His only tools were a stump puller, a pair of mules, and a two-horse wagon. Clearly, hard work was going to be required for this new endeavor to flourish.

Otis probably experienced what any gardener/horticulturist experiences in their first year in South Georgia. While the region is blessed with a long growing season there are many challenges to be overcome. These include heat, humidity, rain and/or drought, and a wide array of insect and disease pressures. These factors all must be dealt with in order to successfully grow a horticultural crop. There were clear reasons why this region was among the last to be agriculturally developed.

Looking through Woodard's notebook, one is struck by the wide breadth of crops he worked with in his first years including: grapes, strawberries, pears, apples, peaches, walnuts, blueberries, almonds, plums, lima beans, lettuce, tomatoes, asparagus, cantaloupes, cowpeas, greens, chestnuts, and jujubes. While most of these crops likely fared poorly in our conditions, a few formed the basis for the horticultural industry we have today.

Pecans were among the first things planted in 1921, and some of those trees remain on the station and are still bearing today. Under Otis Woodard, and later Dr. Ray Worley, the station has been very active in pecan cultivar evaluation and cultural studies. Perhaps more importantly, the station also hired Dr. Tom Crocker and his replacement Dr. Lenny Wells as pecan extension specialists. Through their leadership pecan extension work from the station is known throughout the world. Today, Georgia is the number one pecan producing state, with a value of over 360 million dollars. Many new orchards have been in the last 10 years and pecan production is a rapidly expanding industry.

Otis began collecting and evaluating sweet potato cultivars very early in his career. After they showed promise as a local crop and in 1942 the station hired its second horticulturist, Dr. Silas Harmon, to develop a sweet potato breeding program. Over the years sweet potato became a major crop in South Georgia and several prominent cultivars were developed including 'Georgia Jet', 'Georgia Red', and 'Red Jewel'. Sweet potato growers branched out into many other vegetable crops and vegetable crop production is a major industry in the region.

South Georgia and north Florida is home to a native blueberry known as rabbiteye blueberry. Otis began collecting and conserving wild selections of this local fruit crop in 1925. In 1939 a cooperative breeding program was developed with the USDA. In 1943 the station hired its third horticulturist, Dr. William Brightwell to initiate a breeding program for blueberry. Under his leadership, and later that of Dr. Max Austin, the station released many prominent cultivars for the local blueberry industry including 'Tifblue', 'Brightwell', and 'Climax'. Today Georgia is the fourth leading blueberry producing state.

Over more recent years the Horticulture Department has been prominent in helping to develop many other horticultural crops including Vidalia onions, bell peppers, tomatoes, and watermelon. The Department has also become known for its work in peanut genomics and research into apomixes.

There have been a number of factors that have enabled the department to have success over the years, but probably the most important has been the people involved. Beginning with Otis and continuing until today, the people in the department share a desire to improve the region through science and education. Scientists on the Tifton Campus almost universally have strong interactions with the growers who will put their research to use. Research is not considered complete until it is being used to improve the lives of the citizens of Georgia.

One thing I noticed when looking back through the history of our Department is that it is very difficult to tease out what any one person did. Indeed, you need a team, from the scientists that have the idea, to the technician that puts it in place and provides additional insight, to the extension specialists that interpret and disseminate the information to the grower. Teams do not stop at departmental lines and many commodities have researchers and extension specialists in horticulture, plant pathology, entomology and others all working together to

develop systems based approaches to crop production. Having these teams in place is probably what the Tifton Campus does best, and will allow it to be successful in the next 100 years.