An Outspoken Grower’s Champion William Carlson: 1941-2010

Will Carlson, PhD., almost never failed to get a reaction or a result. And while the variety of those reactions were as diverse as his convictions were strong, the response to his death Jan. 20 has been uniform: The floriculture industry has lost a passionate, influential, progressive and yes, sometimes aggressive, champion and leader.

“Will was tough. He ruffled the feathers of those in the path of change. He had no patience for bureaucracy and red tape and was impatient for results,” Dick Meister wrote about the man who urged him to start Greenhouse Grower 25 years ago. “He could be scathing, but his objectives were always to benefit floriculture and the grower in a very direct way.”

Those objectives were trained on grower success, regardless of the role he took in pushing for it - from the classroom, at greenhouses, on leadership committees, behind fundraising campaigns, before government officials and, for the last 36 years, in his columns, first in American Vegetable Grower, and then in Greenhouse Grower. Many in the industry witnessed that drive come to the forefront when he founded and ran – from his basement – Bedding Plants, Inc. in 1969. (And talk about foresight: one of the association’s first efforts was “Plant – Don’t Pollute.”)

In 1996, SAF inducted Carlson into its Floriculture Hall of Fame. He’d been a constant, and often controversial, voice in the industry, happily pushing buttons and pushing growers forward in his column in Greenhouse Grower.

“He played a huge role in setting our editorial direction and made sure we had the most cutting-edge research that would help growers produce their plants more profitably. He then took an interest in the business side, because even if growers had mastered production, that didn’t mean their businesses would succeed,” said Delilah Onofrey, executive editor of Greenhouse Grower. “I can’t think of another person who has consistently presented the business side to growers the way Will has.”

That business focus was evident when Carlson began teaching at Michigan State University after earning his PhD., from Pennsylvania State University in 1966.

“Will was the leader of the floriculture group at Michigan State University, which was a powerhouse,” said William Miller, now a professor in the Horticulture Department at Cornell University. “Will was the front man, the mouth piece, the in-your-face fundraiser for the group, and since he has a great product to sell, he was extremely effective.” A traveling salesman for horticulture, Carlson even had a fax machine built in car in the late 80s.

Carlson’s business sense probably played a major role in his pushing Michigan growers — who’d been focused on vegetable crops — toward bedding plants in the 70s, when California and Florida were gaining market share. In addition to being a professor, Carlson was an extension specialist in horticulture who rallied growers to come to bedding plants.

“The academic powers of the time were mainly focused on pot plants and cut flowers, but Will was in the right place, at the right age and at the right time to take on the bedding plant thing,” said Cornell’s Miller. “Even more importantly, he saw the leadership opportunity when others did not and was willing to run with it.”

That initiative had lasting effects on the economy of Michigan and the shape of the nation’s floriculture industry. “The reason Michigan is No. 3 in the nation (in terms of floriculture crops) is Will,” said Marvin Miller, PhD., market research manager at Ball Horticulture Company.

Miller witnessed Carlson’s fist-pounding-on-the-table support of floriculture (and toe-stepping-on, being controversial) in the early 80s when he, Carlson, SAF and other segment leaders successfully pushed the USDA to reinstate the Census of Horticultural Specialties in the Bureau of the Census. “He convictions were so strong,” Miller said. “I couldn’t have asked for a stronger ally.”

That kind of support is why “hundreds of growers owe a debt to Will Carlson,” said Onofrey. “Will made a lot of growers millionaires.”

The funeral service was Monday, Jan. 25 in East Lansing, Mich. To see the full obituary written by Carlson’s son, click here.