

# GROWERTALKS

## Features

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### DuPage Horticultural School

*Jennifer Duffield White*

Fifty years ago, the DuPage Horticultural School graduated its first class of 17 bright, young professionals, sending them off into the world to make their marks. That they did. And for the next 25 years, the school continued to turn out men and women who became leaders in the industry.

Even though the DuPage Horticultural School has now been closed as long as it was open, the name is still a legacy and serves as its own kind of calling card.

#### **The beginnings**

G. Carl Ball, president of Geo. J. Ball Inc. (now Ball Horticultural Company) had a passion for learning that he persistently passed on to others. In 1975, Carl and his wife, Vivian, created the Ball Foundation, which, to this day, aims to discover and develop human potential through psychological research and aptitude measurement. They also launched several education initiative partnerships. In 1963, the Balls opened the DuPage Horticultural School in West Chicago, Illinois, using the facilities of Geo. J. Ball Inc. for classwork and training, but making it clear that the school and company were separate entities. The DuPage Horticultural School was a not-for-profit, chartered by the State of Illinois, with Carl Totemeier serving as the school's first director.

"Learning by doing" was the motto and the curriculum combined classroom work with practical work experience. Its lofty goals were matched by its intensity.

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*It is not our intention to produce "specialists" in one year's time although we endeavor to help our students develop their special interests whenever possible. Instead, our course is intended to provide the basic background required of a good grower, much of which will also be of value to those who may eventually work in sales, retailing, management and other related areas of horticulture. Our training will help prepare the individual to meet the current problems of the industry and work toward their solution.*

*—Excerpt from the Program and Curriculum brochure, 1964-1965*

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"We worked very hard in class, in the school greenhouse and on our internships with what was deemed over four years of education crammed into ten and a half months!" says Joan Mazat, a 1988 DuPage graduate

who is now senior business manager of cut flowers, geraniums and poinsettias for Ball Horticultural Company.

### **Classroom time**

The foundation was formal classroom learning, with plenty of guest lectures (say, for example, a guest lecture on poinsettias by Paul Ecke Jr.). In 1964-65, formal classes were held from noon to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday. (Mornings were for practical work.) The curriculum included botany, cultural practices, plant propagation, specific crop studies, greenhouse maintenance and construction, business management, as well as field trips, seminars and optional extra courses.



*Pictured: The first graduating class of the DuPage Horticultural School, 1964.*

### **Work experience**

Students spent a hefty amount of time working (and getting paid for it) during the year. Jim McLain says, "The combination classroom and work program was a fantastic concept. It paid for most of my education and room and board."

Students were required to spend one-half of their time gaining hands-on work experience. Students worked at the Geo. J. Ball facilities, rotating through various roles each month, from 7:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m. Monday through Friday AND Saturday, too.

In addition to working on the grounds and taking classes, students also had periodic "work out" (internship) programs at commercial greenhouses in the Chicago area.

"The on-the-job training was amazing to me and my fellow students. Getting to work for and with people like Henry Snyder, G&E Greenhouse, and many others was a privilege," says Dick Beute, a graduate who claims one of the highlights of his career was getting asked to come back and teach greenhouse courses at DuPage Horticultural School.

"I recall watering crops when on internship with Ron Clesen's Ornamental Plants in Maple Park, Illinois," says Joan. "I can still see the owner Ron watching me work and them coming to me to teach me the true art of watering—a moment I'll never forget and an invaluable lesson that assisted me in becoming a true grower."

### **The "lab"**

The DuPage Horticultural School also had a student-run garden center, the complete management, growing and direction of which was done by the students.

"It is, in effect, a practical laboratory exercise," noted a school brochure. Most of the work, however, was carried on outside of the classroom on the students' own time. Proceeds were used to fund an annual field

trip.

Jim notes, “I was the treasurer for the school-run garden center, which gave me a world of knowledge that I would need in running my own business. The help from the Ball business department in setting up the business plan, to go to the bank, to borrow money to fund the garden center, setting up the books correctly, gave me the edge in running a successful wholesale/retail greenhouse business with a garden center, landscape business and an FTD flower shop.”

Jim went on to found McLain Greenhouses, Garden Center and Flower Shop in Massachusetts.

### **The final project**

Joan remembers, “Our final project was a business plan from building the greenhouse, including all the electrical, heating systems, total physical layout and costs for a full year’s crop scheduling, which cost us much sleep to complete—an amazing project that 26 years later I still have saved because of all the energy invested in it!”

### **Placement**

Upon graduation, a placement service helped students find employment.

Joan Mazat, for example, went straight from graduation to become a section grower for Green Circle. She became a head grower/production manager at Cerny’s Greenhouse in Wisconsin and then did high-end container design at Stoney Creek Gardens before the road led her back to West Chicago, where she’s worked for Ball for the last 15 years.

### **The afterlife**

Joan Mazat was in the last graduating class when the school closed its doors in 1988. She still hears industry colleagues lament about the closing of DuPage Horticultural School and that a similar model is needed in our industry once again.

“The school set the tone for me in horticulture,” says Joan. “It gave me the tools needed to do whatever I have chosen to take on within our industry and the practical knowledge to stay grounded.”

The list of alumni, worldwide, is impressive—managers, business owners, CEOs, head growers and more. But more impressive, perhaps, is their dedication to the industry and ties that bond them. Find a DuPage Hort School graduate and you’ll find someone who loved their time as a student, who often uses exclamation points and has deep bonds with their classmates.

“Yes, yes, yes to the Value!!” says Dick. “DHS education was the greatest!!”

“The best thing about DHS is the lifelong friends that I have made,” says Jim. His best friend to this day is his DuPage classmate Dick Beute. “After 49 years, I have friends that I still talk or email with on a regular basis.”

He adds, “I can’t say enough about how much DuPage Horticultural School did for me in running a successful business. I hope that it will be started again to allow future generations of growers have the same opportunity

that I had." **GT**