



## 'If You Build It, They Will Come'

Our first-ever Hort Hero is Ken Altman, who is dedicated not only to selling plants but also to supporting the industry's future. Case in point: his Center for Applied Horticultural Research

By Paige Worthy

Long before Ken and Deena Altman started Altman Plants — even before they discovered horticulture as a profession, really — they had a mutual passion for social service.

Deena graduated with a bachelor's in human development, and Ken earned a Ph.D. in psychology. Their passion for plants — and the business that sprouted from it — started as a small backyard collection of cactuses and succulents, which grew into a mail-order business in the 1970s. The rest, as they say, was history.

"That led to us having some extra plants that I took around in my Datsun station wagon, seven flats at a time, to sell to nurseries," Ken says. Their customer base grew by word of mouth with every delivery, and soon they were diversifying beyond succulents into flowering plants. In the 1980s, they relocated from Los Angeles to facilities in the San Diego area; over time, they continued to follow their customers into northern California, Arizona and Florida.



Ken Altman and his wife, Deena

**"People need to get involved, let their voices be heard."**

### Inspiration Everywhere

Ken is a busy guy.

He's the chairman of the education committee for the American Floral Endowment.

He's on the executive board of the San Diego Farm Bureau.

He's a member of the California Association of Nurserymen and Garden Centers' Nursery Growers Leadership Board.

Oh, and he runs an incredibly

successful plant company that spans five locations throughout the United States.

He's met some people, and he's seen the issues the industry faces on a daily basis. Through his volunteer efforts as well as his everyday work within the industry, he has returned again and again to his roots in social service and the human side of horticulture.

He found inspiration in the efforts of two researchers, John Erwin of



## Rave Reviews

Red Kennicott, chairman of the American Floral Endowment, on Ken's contribution to the AFE:

"Ken is passionate about the programs and education for young people. He's done a wonderful job of working with the donors and everybody associated with the programs to advance them.

"He's intensely interested in doing things right and providing value for both recipients of the internships and the donors.

"I can't say enough about how dedicated he is to education.

"I'm not just happy — I'm elated with how he's done his work. He's an amazing guy because he believes so much in the program."

the University of Minnesota and Jim Bethke of the University of California Cooperative Extension.

"[Erwin] has been helping us develop research ideas and helping us with our growing techniques" at Altman Plants, he says. "Seeing the creativity and how many good ideas and results he can come up with really quickly" was one thing that inspired him.

And seeing Bethke forced to travel an hour to UC Riverside to access the facilities he needed for his research or do experiments on a desk in his small office also spurred the creation of the center: "It was obvious we could really help him by giving him space and nearby facilities," Altman says.

Extension agencies and university horticulture programs are struggling all over the country, including some of the people Ken had met and worked with personally. So he started researching, planning and building: the Center for Applied Horticultural Research — or CFAHR, pronounced "see far" — was born.

## The Center

Ken found a model to follow in Georgia. He visited another facility,

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**On the Web:** For more information on the Center for Applied Horticultural Research, visit [www.cfah.org](http://www.cfah.org).



the Center for Applied Nursery Research, “a non-profit organization which provides funding and facilities for green industry needs driven research in an operational nursery setting.”

D. E. “Skeeter” McCorkle showed Altman around the facilities and explained how everything worked at CANR, which provided some of the foundation for the CFAHR, located at the Vista, Calif., Altman Plants facility. “The name made so much sense that I used part of it to name the CFAHR research center as well,” Altman says.

Its main purpose: “addressing, through research, the practical issues the nursery and floriculture industry face.”

There’s now a greenhouse with six separate rooms for experiments and a lab, as well as a meeting room that holds 65 people. There are several lab techs employed by the center — as well as its director, Lucia Villavicencio — and local and national organizations alike use the meeting space on a regular basis. Villavicencio publishes a newsletter sharing the findings from the CFAHR research.



In December 2010, the center will celebrate its second birthday.

Villavicencio says the center has made great progress since its inception, but she’s hoping that there will be even more input from growers in the coming year on which research should take high priority. She says it’s one of the benefits of being a private research facility: There’s no agenda from corporations or governments.

### Setting an Example

The center fills a growing gap for Extension agencies as well as university programs dedicated to horticultural research, which are quickly losing their footing as important funding priorities.

“We are losing it; there’s no question about it.”



**“Our industry is not funding education; I don’t know if the margins are tight or if people just aren’t getting it.”**

he says. “A lot of these researchers...are looking at retirement at some point, and the universities are not replacing them. Our industry is not funding education; I don’t know if the margins are tight or if people just aren’t getting it.”

There are, of course, other organizations dedicated to funding scholarships and research, providing government advocacy and providing other services to industry members: the American Floral Endowment, OFA — an Association of Horticulture Professionals — and the Society of American Florists, to name just a few.

Among those organizations’ many roles is awarding scholarships to passionate, deserving students who will make up the future of the

industry. The AFE recently awarded its first-ever Ecke Scholarship, which “honors the late Paul Ecke Jr., who made indispensable contributions to the advancement of the global floriculture industry.” Students who have completed, or are in the process of completing a bachelor’s or master’s degree in horticulture or a related field, with the intention of pursuing a higher degree and leading floricultural scientists and educators. Altman says the caliber of entries was so high that choosing a winner was incredibly difficult.

“If people could read the applications, they’d want to contribute,” he says.

With so many deserving students, it’s clear that organizations *could* dole out a lot more of these



scholarships and other support to the industry. But those organizations aren’t getting a lot in the way of funding, either, despite their obvious value to the industry.


Ken’s advice to growers today: Put your money where your mouth is. Support the organizations that support you. Find the money to be generous with the industry, especially now, before the



HORT HERO

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industry organizations are gutted, the university programs are absorbed into other sciences and our industry has no new research to propel it forward and no political leverage to protect it.

“People need to get involved, let their voices be heard,” Ken says. “I think people see opportunities to give and think, ‘No, it’s too expensive.’ Well, it’s way more expensive not to invest in our future and let the problems build. We need to be proactive in dealing with them.” 

*Paige Worthy was managing editor of Lawn & Garden Retailer. For more information on this story, contact Editorial Director Tim Hodson at [thodson@sgcmail.com](mailto:thodson@sgcmail.com) or 847.391.1019.*

