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International Fruit Extension Funt's Forte

In Armenia, Dick Funt worked to establish an Extension delivery system to reach as many of the country's 930 villages as possible.

An Extension specialist who pioneered the horticultural economics of fruit production, Ohio State University professor emeritus **Dr. Richard C. Funt** is an international expert with 30 years of experience analyzing the efficiencies of orchard systems. During his extension career at the University of Maryland and The Ohio State University Horticulture & Crop Science Department, Dick Funt focused on providing information as to the best management practices for tree and small fruit production. He has delivered non-biased, research-based biological and technological information to growers, producers and extension agents across the globe since 1974, including sabbaticals in Armenia, China, England, Egypt and New Zealand.

Based on his astute dissertation findings, *The Economics of Different Orchard Systems*, Funt developed a way to compare the costs and returns of different orchard systems. "I added the business side of the story for the growers," Funt explained. "In 1974, OSU alum Dr. Loren D. Tukey (PhD 1952) and I presented a paper at the 19th International Society for Horticultural Science (ISHS) Congress in Warsaw, Poland. This was the first paper of its kind in horticultural economics, providing information on profits from different orchard systems that had different cost and return streams. Generally, those orchards that had earlier returns than others were more profitable over the life of the orchard."

OSU Professor Emeritus Dr. Dick Funt is an international Extension fruit specialist with 30 years of experience extending non-biased research to growers and educators.

Using an internal rate of return analysis, Funt compared low, medium and high density orchards, as well those orchards that were either hand or mechanically harvested. Funt's economic analysis helped growers decide which system would be most profitable and when that profit would be seen. "My analysis was based on the concept of 'time value of money' where a dollar earned today was worth more than an equal dollar earned later in the life of an orchard. My research showed that growers with fewer than 50 acres of land should consider the high density orchard system, while those with more than 50 acres should consider the medium density system. Both small and large growers learned with my comparisons that dwarf tree density orchards would be expensive in the first years; but, the investment would be returned early in the life of the planting as compared to other systems," Funt said.

Fruit growers require a huge volume of information just to complete one year of production. Retail market producers require even more information than those who sell fruit to processing markets. Staying informed on ever-changing chemicals, irrigation methods, and orchard systems is a real challenge for growers. Private and grower-based advisory systems were being established in Europe because governments were reducing funding for farmer education. A longtime proponent of the Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service advisory system in the United States, Funt traveled internationally to examine other grower advisory systems.

While working for the USDA Marketing Assistance Project, Dick Funt trained Armenian growers in controlling rodents, pruning and training of fruit trees.

"The US public advisory system was unique and proved itself valuable by providing non-biased applied research to growers. Similar advisory systems around the world were attached to the government agencies that were also responsible for regulating the industry. Therefore, growers in other countries were unwilling to inquire about crop improvements for fear of facing government fines," Funt recalled. "The strength of the US Extension system is that the agents are educators, not regulators."

Funt discovered three concepts vital to advisory success in his system comparisons. "First, the information presented to the growers must originate from the local area. Second, the information must be presented in three components - biological, economical and technological. Third, grower-group participation was crucial."

It was in New Zealand that Funt learned about the successful system of grower-group education. The Agricultural Knowledge Information System (AKIS), which originated in The Netherlands, had groups of small farmers gather to exchange farming practices. The grower group relied on a "bottom up" approach as to the program and information needs. In this format agricultural consultant speakers were requested to attend the monthly meetings. Thus, the flow of information evolved from the growers and either publicly or privately supported speakers addressed their issues. While similar to the US system, this system had no generalist (county agent), but instead relied on a specialist as a resource person.

Funt found that the grower-group style system gave voice to growers who were often shut out of the US system. "In the US, the Extension program centered around the county office and an advisory board which represented only the major production and marketing commodities. The advisory board style promoted the board's major concerns of milk, grain or forage production. As such, fruit producers, who were organized outside of the county as a statewide organization, were overlooked," Funt said. "Therefore, the new grower or growers with small acreage were not heard in the US, whereas in New Zealand the "bottom up" approach allowed new growers to gather the needed information in their own geographic area. This system of delivering information for the common good of producers had evolved to be more effective than any previous system."

Funt found the time he spent traveling, researching and presenting in foreign countries to be invaluable to his extension service to Ohio's growers. "International experience and research brings a more comprehensive view to Ohio. The experience provided information for grower decisions and helped me recommend best practices to the fruit producers of Ohio."

Story and web publishing by Victor van Buchem. Armenia photos courtesy Dick Funt. Farm Science Review photo by Victor van Buchem.
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