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Planting a Seed: The Nineteenth-Century Horticultural Boom in America

Between 1850 and 1880, enthusiasm for horticulture swept the nation, particularly the Upper Midwest. Nursery owners and seed traders welcomed the escalating demand for trees and flowers but soon faced consumer complaints about their questionable business practices. Customer dissatisfaction had many sources, ranging from unethical entrepreneurs to faltering industry infrastructure and underhanded dealing. The nurserymen and seed dealers worked diligently to overcome these criticisms, sharing information to improve industry methods and attempting to deflect responsibility for fraudulent practice onto disreputable competitors or inexperienced customers. The conflicts between commercial horticulturists and their broadening customer base reflected tensions within America's rapidly expanding consumer culture and suggested that traditional restraints on industry practice based on personal ties and shared values would no longer suffice when dealing with a newly diversified and seemingly intractable clientele.

In 1854, the Chicago-based *Prairie Farmer* published a commentary on problems besetting the American nursery industry. "The Nurseryman has his customer more fully at his mercy than any which involves interests of the same magnitude," the *Farmer* claimed. The nursery business, the *Farmer* continued, "demands an integrity and an amount of knowledge above other trades." Customers were vulnerable for many reasons, this well-respected agricultural newspaper maintained. While an Illinois farmer or small-town banker might know hogs and cattle, good farmland, or a profitable investment, he had little knowledge of trees and flowers and was dependent on the seller to provide healthy plants that matched their labels. Many customers placed horticultural

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orders with distant nurseries and seedsmen, leaving them little opportunity to apply even their modest knowledge to plant purchases. Finally, the *Farmer* pointed out, the consequences of an unsavory horticultural transaction were not always readily apparent when new plants arrived. “A fruit, untrue to name, makes no revelation of the fact, often for some years,” the *Farmer* declared. Even when a plant left the nursery “without a breath of life in it,” it passed through many hands, making the source of the problem difficult to pinpoint.¹

For many readers, the *Farmer*’s comments struck a sensitive chord. Between 1850 and 1880, demand for trees and flowers boomed, spurred on by worldwide plant exploration, the introduction of many new ornamental varieties, and a plethora of agricultural and horticultural publications that encouraged hands-on horticulture and delivered practical advice to would-be gardeners and orchardists. Domestic and agricultural reformers added their voices to the chorus promoting plant culture, often describing horticultural embellishments as critical components of desirable home environments. As they touted the benefits of beautiful, ordered home grounds, these proponents firmly linked horticulture with moral virtue, progressive tendencies, and even family intelligence. Finding the varied arguments hard to resist, Americans of all ranks and circumstances jumped on the horticultural bandwagon, and domestic landscapes across the nation blossomed with newly established lawns, orchards, shade trees, and fashionable flower gardens. Struggling to meet the seemingly insatiable call for trees and flowers, America’s nursery and seed businesses proliferated. With competition on the rise, well-established firms, along with many new ventures, turned to innovative marketing strategies designed to spark even greater horticultural interest.²

Unfortunately, commercial horticulturists and their newly minted customers sometimes encountered bumps on the road to a thriving orchard, flourishing flower bed, or grounds dappled with shade. Venting their frustrations in horticultural journals, farm magazines, letters to nurserymen, and in conversations among friends and neighbors, customers cried foul and regularly accused the nursery and seed trades of false advertising, careless business practices, or even outright consumer fraud. Professional horticulturists were themselves occasionally burned by deceptive business practices. Frequently engaged in whole-

¹ “The Nursery Business,” *Prairie Farmer* (July 1854): 258.

² For an overview of the cultural circumstances surrounding this unprecedented interest in horticulture, see Cheryl Lyon-Jenness, *For Shade and For Comfort: Democratizing Horticulture in the Nineteenth-Century Midwest* (West Lafayette, 2004). See also “Surroundings Indicate Character,” *Prairie Farmer* 5 (16 Feb. 1860): 106; and Joseph Breck, *The Flower Garden; or Breck’s Book of Flowers* (Boston, 1851), 15.

sale exchange of plants or in ordering particular varieties from growers with specialized inventories, they were inconvenienced when plants received did not match those promised. More worrisome to established professionals were the potentially fraudulent practices by competitors new to the trade that threatened to undermine the horticultural boom.

Both the wave of horticultural enthusiasm and the problems it engendered took strong root in the upper Midwest.³ In the early decades of the century, settlers streamed into the Old Northwest, establishing the states of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin between 1803 and 1848. With the help of advancing transportation and communication facilities, residents quickly transformed newly settled regions into well-tended farms and bustling towns and villages. Their diligent efforts and demand for the region's agricultural products brought unprecedented prosperity, and as historians Andrew Cayton and Peter Onuf have pointed out, the region emerged at midcentury as "one of the most important centers of commercial agriculture in the world."⁴ When, at the same time, horticultural advocacy created what some have labeled the "golden age" of American horticulture, many midwesterners, eager for consumer goods, began to shape new domestic landscapes, gained access to national markets, and, in growing numbers, enjoyed the means to cultivate at least some level of refinement.⁵ The region, in other words, offered commercial horticulturists a new clientele that had the wherewithal to purchase ever more shade trees and fashionable flowers. Midwestern customers, in turn, enjoyed the benefits of readily available horticultural wares, but they also experienced all the problems and potential abuses of a lucrative and wildly expanding industry and were not shy about expressing their displeasure.

Although the *Prairie Farmer*'s assertion that horticultural customers faced a unique set of difficulties was to prove prophetic, that assessment told only part of the story. The mid-nineteenth-century horticultural bonanza and the controversies it generated were, in fact, an

³ See "The Meeting of the State Horticultural Society," *Michigan Farmer* 16 (Jan. 1858): 47; and Edgar Sanders, "Who Buys the Seed?" *Prairie Farmer* 7 (11 Apr. 1861): 239.

⁴ Andrew R. L. Cayton and Peter S. Onuf, *The Midwest and the Nation: Rethinking the History of an American Region* (Bloomington, 1990), 34–35; and David Blanke, *Sowing the American Dream: How Consumer Culture Took Root in the Rural Midwest* (Athens, 2000), 7.

⁵ Charles Van Ravenswaay, *A Nineteenth-Century Garden* (New York, 1977), 18. Historian and botanist George H. M. Lawrence has also described the second half of the nineteenth century as a period of unprecedented horticultural activity, unrivaled "before or since." See George H. M. Lawrence, "The Development of American Horticulture," in *America's Garden Legacy, A Taste for Pleasure*, ed. George H. M. Lawrence (Philadelphia, 1978), 93. Also see Carlton B. Lees, "The Golden Age of Horticulture," *Historic Preservation* 24/25 (Oct.–Dec. 1972): 35–36; and Patricia M. Tice, *Gardening in America, 1830–1910* (Rochester, N.Y., 1984), 71–73.

early manifestation of tensions surfacing in a much broader commercial expansion. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, many Americans, regardless of their occupational or economic circumstances, were willing participants in a developing consumer culture. A growing body of historical literature has explored varying aspects of this escalating interest in "refinements," the increasingly democratized marketplace it produced, and the conflicts it engendered as both producers and consumers came to terms with the booming demand for goods. Some studies, like David Blanke's work on the rural Midwest, have explored regional proclivities for consumption or have emphasized its strong hold on rural communities. Others have considered the efficacy of social commentators who, as they linked consumption and progress, hastened the spread of consumer goods among urban dwellers and rural families alike. Still others have documented techniques of promotion and distribution, pointing out the increasing importance of advertising, catalog merchandising, commercial drummers, and notions peddlers in generating both new consumers and new accusations of fraud or deceit.⁶

The mid-nineteenth-century horticultural trade offers an untapped perspective from which to scrutinize America's emerging consumer culture and to evaluate the often contentious interplay between a growing industry and its newly expanded clientele.⁷ Focusing on the mid-

⁶ See for example, Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of American Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York, 1992); Simon J. Bronner, *Consuming Visions: Accumulation and Display of Goods in America, 1880–1920* (New York, 1989); Karen Haltunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in American, 1830–1870* (Bloomington, 1982); and Pamela Walker Laird, *Advertising Progress: American Business and the Rise of Consumer Marketing* (Baltimore, 1998). For perspectives on salesmanship and its influence on expanding consumer culture in the mid-nineteenth-century, see Timothy B. Spears, *100 Years on the Road: The Traveling Salesman in American Culture* (New Haven, 1995); Steven Hahn and Jonathan Prude, eds., *The Countryside in the Age of Capitalist Transformation: Essays in the Social History of Rural America* (Chapel Hill, 1985); David Jaffee, "Peddlers of Progress and the Transformation of the Rural North, 1760–1860," *Journal of American History* 78 (Sept. 1991): 511–35. Studies of the influence of the postal service on escalating consumer interest also provide useful context. See Richard R. John, *Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995); Wayne E. Fuller, *The American Mail: Enlarger of the Common Life* (Chicago, 1972); and Richard B. Kielbowicz, *News in the Mail: The Press, Post Office, and Public Information, 1700s–1860s* (New York, 1989). Many have also written on the social consequences of advertising. See especially Stuart Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture* (New York, 1976); Stephen Fox, *The Mirror Makers: A History of American Advertising and Its Creators* (New York, 1984); and Ellen Gruber Garvey, *The Ad-man in the Parlor: Magazines and the Gendering of Consumer Culture, 1880s to 1910s* (New York, 1996).

⁷ For an early study of problems in the horticultural trade, see Earl W. Hayter, "Horticultural Humbuggery Among the Western Farmers, 1850–1890," *Indiana Magazine of History* 43 (Sept. 1947). See also Cheryl Lyon-Jenness, "A Telling Tirade: What Was the Controversy Surrounding Nineteenth-Century Midwestern Tree Agents Really All About?" *Agricultural History*, 72 (Fall 1998): 675–707.

western plant boom in this study, I will first document the growth of commercial horticulture at midcentury and then explore the problems generated by the industry's rapid expansion and the demands of its unique product. Next, I will consider links between increasing competition, innovative promotional strategies, and escalating customer concerns, and, finally, I will conclude with an analysis of how beleaguered nurserymen and seed dealers worked to protect their interests and mollify their cadre of complaining customers. As they grappled with these new marketplace realities, horticultural professionals diligently tried to improve their techniques and willingly shared information that would enhance trade practices. Horticulturists came to understand, however, that unrestrained industry growth and modern promotional strategies, while effectively promoting demand, simultaneously enhanced competitive pressure and consumer dissatisfaction. The process of democratizing horticultural consumerism, in other words, was both bane and benefit for the mid-nineteenth-century plant trade, and it suggested that traditional strategies for controlling industry practice based on common knowledge, personal ties, and shared values would no longer suffice as a new, diverse, and sometimes intractable clientele took to planting trees and flowers.

A Horticultural Bonanza

Mid-nineteenth-century horticultural proponents, seeking a source of industry problems or customer dissatisfaction, had to look no further than their own success in cultivating interest in trees and flowers. Through much of the eighteenth century, a few nurseries scattered along the Atlantic coast and near large eastern cities met the nation's modest demand for ornamental plants and fruit trees. Horticultural resources picked up in the early decades of the nineteenth century as several more nurserymen supplied ornamental plants to a gradually increasing clientele. In Newburgh, New York, for example, the Downing family established a small nursery in 1801 and rapidly expanded its offerings over the next several decades. Near Boston, the Winship Nursery began operations in 1816, and Thomas J. Hogg and Sons opened a nursery in New York City in 1822. In the early 1830s, Robert Buist of Philadelphia entered the nursery and florist trade, and soon his Rosedale Nurseries were widely known for roses, camellias, and indoor plants.⁸ A growing number of American seed firms also joined eastern

⁸ See George H. M. Lawrence, "The Development of American Horticulture," in *America's Garden Legacy: A Taste for Pleasure*, ed. George H. M. Lawrence (Philadelphia, 1978), 92–94; and Henry W. Lawrence, "The Geography of the United States Nursery Industry: Loca-

nurseries in supplying the nation's horticultural needs. An early Philadelphia seed house operated by Bernard M'Mahon specialized in native tree, shrub, and flower seeds. Henry Dreer, also of Philadelphia, opened a seed business in 1838 and eventually specialized in the mail-order distribution of flower seeds. A Scottish immigrant, Grant Thorburn, established a seed firm in New York City in the early nineteenth century, while horticulturist and author Joseph Breck supplied seeds to customers in the Boston area beginning in 1836.⁹

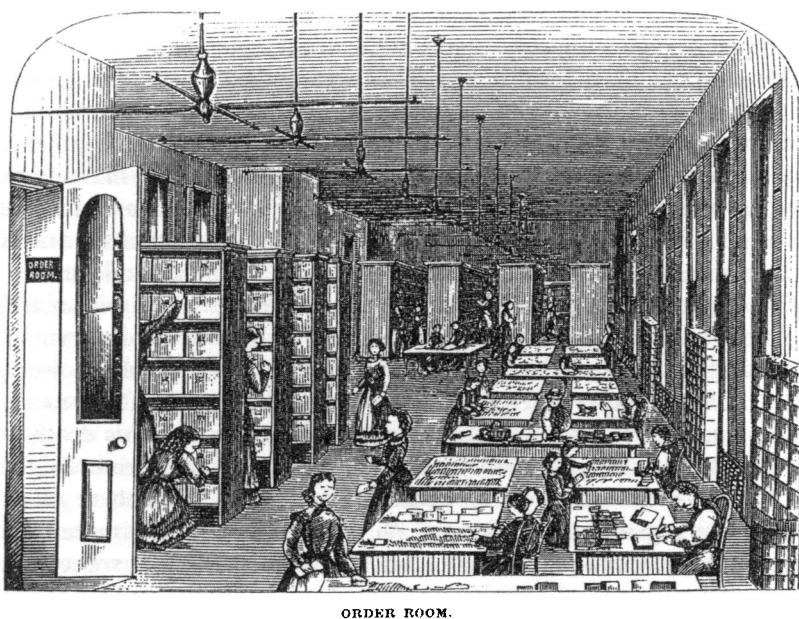
A number of these enterprises remained competitive through much of the nineteenth century, but the opening of the Midwest to settlement and an expanded network of canals and railroads changed the dynamics of the industry. In response, the horticultural trade moved westward, and by the late 1850s, was centered in or near Rochester, New York. Sensing the advantages of the region in terms of plant culture and ready access to transportation networks, two European-trained horticulturists, George Ellwanger and Patrick Barry, opened their Rochester-based Mount Hope Nursery and Gardens in the early 1840s. By the 1860s, Ellwanger and Barry described their nursery as the largest in the world and noted that their phenomenal success rested on supplying the horticultural needs of the bustling Midwest. By the 1870s, the Mount Hope Nursery had spread over six hundred and fifty acres and included sixteen greenhouses, facilities for packing and shipping plants, and a staff of more than four hundred workers. With escalating demand, nursery expansion continued, and eventually Rochester was home to at least eighteen major commercial nurseries that together cultivated thousands of acres of fruit and ornamental trees, shrubs, and a variety of flowers.¹⁰

The nation's seed industry also moved westward in the mid-nineteenth century. Perhaps the most successful of a number of seed producers was James Vick, horticultural editor, publisher, and writer,

tional Change and Regional Specialization in the Production of Woody Ornamental Plants" (Ph.D. diss., University of Oregon, 1985), 129–38, 147–48, for accounts of early American nurseries and seed houses and their geographic requirements. Also see Liberty Hyde Bailey, *The Standard Cyclopedia of Horticulture*, vols. 1–3 (New York, 1937), 1537; and U. P. Hedrick, *A History of Horticulture in America to 1860* (New York, 1950), 214, 245.

⁹ A. J. Downing, "Notes on the Progress of Gardening in the United States during the Year 1840," *Gardener's Magazine* 16 (1840): 643–44; and "Henry A. Dreer," *Gardener's Monthly* 16 (Jan. 1874): 19. See also Hedrick, *A History of Horticulture in America*, 203–4, 249–51; and Bailey, *The Standard Cyclopedia of Horticulture*, 1518.

¹⁰ For commentary on the rise of Rochester as a nursery center, see Diane Holahan Gross, "From the Genesee to the World," *University of Rochester Library Bulletin* 35 (1982): 7–11; and *Garden of the Genesee* (Rochester, N.Y., 1940), 11. Also see Blake McKelvey, "The Flower City: Center of Nurseries and Fruit Orchards," in *The Rochester Historical Society Publication*, vol. 18 (Rochester, N.Y., 1923), 127; Blake McKelvey, *Rochester: The Flower City 1855–1890* (Cambridge, Mass., 1949); and Dan Parks, "The Cultivation of Flower City," *Rochester History* 45, no. 3–4 (1983): 25–45. For a detailed portrayal of the Mount Hope Nursery, see *History of Monroe County, New York* (Philadelphia, 1877), 113.



ORDER ROOM.

Vick's order room. To impress distant customers with the volume of his seed trade, James Vick included illustrations of company operations in his seed catalogs. The order room bustled with more than seventy-five workers, divided into "gangs," who processed thousands of seed orders daily. From *Vick's Illustrated Floral Guide for 1873*. Original in Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, University of Rochester Library, Rochester, New York.

who turned his organizational skills to seed production and soon transformed a small seed garden on Rochester's Union Street into one of the nation's best-known, most respected seed companies. By 1867, the firm filled nearly a thousand orders each day, advertised in over three thousand newspapers nationwide, and by the early 1870s, sent out over two hundred thousand catalogs yearly. Like many large nurseries and seed producers of the period, James Vick was determined to vertically integrate his business. The Vick's Seed Company both produced and imported seeds, but it also ran a printing office, a bindery, and a "box-making establishment," and it employed artists and engravers for the production of catalog illustrations and advertisements. As one pundit noted, the Vick's Seed Company produced everything required to get seeds in the hands of consumers, except for the paper used in printing catalogs.¹¹

¹¹ For a good discussion of the rise of Rochester seedsmen, see Parks, "The Cultivation of Flower City," 25–45; Karl Sanford Kabelac, "Advice for Gardeners: Vick's Monthly Magazine (The First Series, 1878–1891)," *University of Rochester Library Bulletin* 39 (1986): 24–35; and *History of Monroe County, New York* (Philadelphia, 1877), 113–14.

Well-established eastern firms and the new Rochester nurserymen and seed dealers often cultivated a national clientele, but regional nurseries serving a more localized market also emerged in increasing numbers at midcentury. Like their competitors to the east, these midwestern firms positioned themselves to take advantage of favorable growing conditions, expanding transportation networks, and new markets as settlers moved west and established orchards and ornamented home grounds. In the early 1840s, for example, John Kennicott started one of first commercial nurseries in Illinois, locating his home and nursery, "The Grove," in Cook County, northwest of Chicago. A physician and horticultural editor of the *Prairie Farmer* as well as a nurseryman, Kennicott sold a variety of fruit and ornamental trees, shrubs, flowers, and bulbous plants to customers throughout Illinois and in newly settled regions further west, continuing in business until his death in 1863.¹² Other Illinois nurserymen followed Kennicott's lead. By the early 1870s, Bloomington, in central Illinois, had taken over as an important regional center for the nursery trade, boasting more than sixteen ornamental-plant establishments. One of the most successful, F. K. Phoenix, moved his nursery business from Delavan, Wisconsin, and opened his Bloomington Nursery in 1852. By 1872, Phoenix advertisements boasted of six hundred acres under cultivation and twelve greenhouses.¹³ Similar constellations of regional nurseries and seed firms emerged around Detroit, Michigan, and near Cincinnati, Cleveland, Columbus, and Toledo, Ohio.¹⁴

With the expansion of the horticultural trade into the Midwest, many small nurseries and seed producers sprang up to meet local needs. In some instances, individuals with strong horticultural interest and knowledge entered the trade briefly as they established their own ornamented home grounds and orchards and saw an opportunity to spread the horticultural word to friends and neighbors. These individuals

¹² For a study of Kennicott and his accomplishments, see Erik A. Ernst, "John A. Kennicott of The Grove: Physician, Horticulturist, and Journalist in Nineteenth-Century Illinois," *Illinois State Historical Society Journal* 74 (Summer 1981): 109–18; Charles D. Bragdon, "A Biographical Sketch of the Life of Dr. John A. Kennicott," *Transactions of the Illinois State Horticultural Society for 1863* (Alton, 1864), 38–42; and Richard Bardolph, *Agricultural Literature and the Early Illinois Farmer* (Urbana, 1948), esp. chs. 2 and 3. See also Daryl G. Watson, "Shade and Ornamental Trees in the Nineteenth-Century Northeastern United States," (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois, 1978), 209–11.

¹³ For numbers of Illinois nurseries and their location, see "Nurserymen, Florists, Seedsmen, and Dealers in Horticultural Stock," *American Horticultural Annual* 1871, 147. Also see F. K. Phoenix, "Some Observations on the Climate and Soil, and the State of Horticulture in Wisconsin Territory," *Magazine of Horticulture* 11 (Feb. 1845): 56–58; and "Trees, Plants, Seeds" [advertisement], *American Agriculturist* 31 (March 1872): 115.

¹⁴ For an overview of the number of Ohio nurserymen, see "Nurserymen, Florists, Seedsmen, and Dealers in Horticultural Stock," *American Horticultural Annual* 1871, 146. Also see Hedrick, *A History of Horticulture in America*, 311.

might remain in business for several years, but as initial demand declined, they often turned their attention to fruit growing and farming. Others, who were in the business to stay, built a solid reputation in their local market and often enhanced their inventory by purchasing plants from major suppliers like Ellwanger and Barry. Although local residents might purchase trees and shrubs from these small enterprises, they could enjoy the “very best of everything” as local vendors tapped into the national horticultural marketplace for their own wares.¹⁵

America’s horticultural boom was hard to miss. At midcentury, individuals calling themselves nurserymen, seedsmen, or florists increased with each decade, totaling 8,479 in the 1850 population census; 21,788 by 1860; 32,520 in 1870; and in the 1880 population census, reaching 56,032.¹⁶ If individuals failed to note the number of nurseries in their region or to observe their neighbor’s newly ornamented dooryard, they might catch references to the volume of the trade in the horticultural and agricultural press. Frequently, commentators described increasing horticultural interest, declaring, like the author of an 1860 article in the widely circulated *American Agriculturist*, that Americans had developed a “generous enthusiasm” for trees and flowers. Several years later, *Moore’s Rural New Yorker* suggested that the “enthusiasm” translated into unprecedented business opportunity. “Trees, shrubs, plants and seeds of the rarest kinds, are purchased and planted freely,” the *Rural New Yorker* claimed, “and nurserymen and seedsmen find it difficult to keep up with the popular demand.”¹⁷ All these horticultural orders and the volume of plant material crisscrossing the country affected more than the nursery trade. In 1867, the *Horticultrist* pointed out, with some surprise, that the “amount of trees sold and shipped by the railroads in Western New York is over eight thousand tons, exceeding in value one and a half million of dollars annually.”¹⁸ The Rochester postmaster expressed similar astonishment in 1870, remarking that about

¹⁵ See, for example, B. W. Steere’s description of his early years as a nurseryman in Adrian Michigan, in T. T. Lyon, *History of Michigan Horticulture: Being a Part of the Seventeenth Annual Report of the Secretary of the State Horticultural Society of Michigan* (Lansing, 1887), 220–21.

¹⁶ See “Occupations of the Male Inhabitants,” *U. S. Census of Population 1850*, 1850.1–1850.3, microfilm copy, roll 1, lxxi; Joseph C. G. Kennedy, compiler, “Occupations in the United States,” in *Population of the United States in 1860: Compiled from the Original Returns of the Eighth Census* (Washington, D.C., 1864), 662, 664, 674; Francis A. Walker, compiler, “Persons Engaged in Each Occupation,” *The Statistics of the Population of the United States from the Original Returns of the Ninth Census*, vol. 1 (Washington, D.C., 1872), 674; *Compendium of the Tenth Census 1880*, part 2 (Washington, D.C., 1885), microfilm copy, roll 3, 1382–83.

¹⁷ See “A Talk about ‘Horticulture’,” *American Agriculturist* 19 (Oct. 1860): 305; and “American Taste in Gardening,” *Moore’s Rural New Yorker* 14 (6 June 1863): 183.

¹⁸ “Western New York Nursery Business,” *Horticultrist* 22 (Nov. 1867): 350.

one-fourth of the letters received at the Rochester post office were seed orders for the Vick's Seed Company. When that statement is considered in the context of the many other major horticultural firms doing business in the region, it is clear that the trade was booming.¹⁹

A New Breed Enters the Trade

Inevitably, the rapid expansion of the nursery and seed business caught the attention of a new breed of businessman, and a dichotomy quickly emerged between long-established nurserymen who considered themselves horticultural professionals and later entrants looking for quick profits in a seemingly lucrative industry. Most early nurserymen were knowledgeable about plant varieties and culture, and they used their knowledge in the day-to-day conduct of business. Among industry leaders, George Ellwanger and Patrick Barry had received horticultural training in Europe and arrived in America with a firm knowledge base and vast experience. Others, like John Kennicott or Charles Downing, gained experience in a modest family nursery business and continued in the trade throughout their adult years. Still other nurserymen and seed dealers were simply passionate about plants, learned from their own experience or from mentors in the trade, and built both horticultural knowledge and a solid reputation through hard work and careful experimentation. Many early nurserymen and seed dealers were also firm proponents of horticulture as a mechanism for transforming both landscapes and society. Men like Joseph Breck or Charles Downing proclaimed the advantages of tree and flower culture as they wrote for the horticultural or agricultural press, and they encouraged readers to share their enthusiasm and dedication. Committed horticulturists also often shared views and information through private writings and at horticultural and agricultural society meetings.²⁰

Entrepreneurs who saw the horticultural boom as an avenue to wealth had little of this ideological fervor or practical knowledge. Often these individuals had experimented, and failed, with other avenues to success, before turning to horticulture as yet another opportunity to make good. John Kennicott corresponded with many individuals interested in establishing nurseries in newly settled states and territories to the west of Illinois, and their letters reveal a very different perspective

¹⁹ For mid-nineteenth-century commentary on the growth of Vick's, see "An Immense Seed Establishment," *Horticulturist* 22 (Oct. 1867): 320.

²⁰ See, for example, J. Kennicott, "The Late Pomological Convention at Buffalo," *Prairie Farmer* 9 (Jan. 1849): 24–25. For brief biographies of prominent horticultural advocates, see Liberty Hyde Bailey, *The Standard Cyclopedia of Horticulture* (New York, 1937), 1563–1604.

on the horticultural trade. In typical examples, correspondents wrote for advice and admitted they were drawn to horticulture by hopes of improving their fortunes. One individual wrote to Kennicott offering a supply of unsold boots and shoes in exchange for viable nursery stock. Andrew Siler, a Utah Territory correspondent, had nothing to barter, but implored Kennicott to send free seeds and cuttings as a start for his nursery. After making his living as a cabinetmaker for many years, Siler reported that he had "become heartily tired of jack planes and rip saws." Establishing a successful horticultural enterprise at the edge of the Mormon frontier posed both challenge and opportunity, but Siler presumed he would find the "labor of fruit and flower growing . . . more healthy and pleasant," and probably more profitable than his previous endeavors.²¹

The inexperience and lack of horticultural knowledge among a growing number of nurserymen presented real problems for the industry. The increasingly competitive nature of the trade required that practitioners manage large, perishable inventories, promote their product, and be prepared to ride out economic downturns and the uncertain money supply that plagued the nation in the middle decades of the nineteenth century.²² More critically, nurserymen and seed dealers sold a product that required extensive knowledge to produce and market successfully. As the industry prospered, demands for horticultural expertise increased. By the mid-nineteenth-century, for example, savvy customers itemized specific varieties of fruits and ornamental plants in their requests. Many desirable fruit and weeping ornamental trees were grown on grafted stock, and a successful nurseryman who did not understand grafting procedures needed to hire someone who did. Fashionable new plants also flooded the trade at midcentury, and to meet customer demand, commercial horticulturists had to have a keen eye for plant varieties and proper names and the ability to evaluate both the benefits and potential problems of newly introduced species. Colorful, long-blooming bedding plants like fuchsias and verbenas were all the rage, but in many areas of the Midwest they had to be treated as tender

²¹ See R. O. Thompson, Nebraska City, Nebraska Territory, to John A. Kennicott, The Grove, Illinois (24 July 1860), Kennicott Business Papers no. 889; and Andrew L. Siler, Fountain Green, Utah Territory, to John A. Kennicott, The Grove, Illinois (22 Mar. 1862), Kennicott Business Papers no. 1183. Original copies of all Kennicott correspondence are housed at the Grove National Historic Landmark in Glenview, Illinois. A portion of the Kennicott Business Papers are also available on microfilm from the Illinois State Historical Society in Springfield. Hereafter, Kennicott's name and location will be abbreviated JAK, and the Kennicott Business Papers will be abbreviated KBP.

²² For commentary on economic problems in the Midwest, see James L. Huston, *The Panic of 1857 and the Coming of the Civil War* (Baton Rouge, 1987); Paul W. Gates, *Agriculture and the Civil War* (New York, 1965), 5–6, and 224–25; and Cayton and Onuf, *The Midwest and the Nation*, esp. ch. 5.

perennials, which often meant producing, selling, and transporting them as pot plants. Coniferous trees and hedge plants were also in demand, but they required specialized propagation and cultural techniques to produce a viable nursery stock.²³

Inexperienced nurserymen who sought their fortune in the Midwest faced another set of challenges. Growing conditions in the region were sometimes difficult, and in most instances, very different from the Northeast or the mid-Atlantic regions that had been home to the nursery trade. Prairie soils, frequent summer droughts, persistent, drying winds, great variation in winter and summer temperatures, and even the climate-ameliorating effects of the Great Lakes challenged conventional horticultural practice. Hardiness under regional climatic conditions became a primary consideration for nurserymen and their customers, and both complained when they lost carefully tended peach orchards to an unusually harsh winter or when cherished conifers could not withstand summer heat and drought. These new variables challenged the skills of even the most experienced nurserymen, and often left those who lacked horticultural knowledge with dying stock and unhappy customers.

Industry Growing Pains

The rapid expansion of the horticultural industry not only attracted a new kind of practitioner but also strained long-established internal structures and business practices. Those strains, along with challenges inherent in the nursery and seed industry readily translated into disappointed or disgruntled customers all too willing to voice complaints against the trade. Typically, America's commercial horticulturists had depended on each other for developing and expanding their plant inventories. As knowledgeable nurserymen moved westward, they often purchased a stock of trees, shrubs, and herbaceous perennials from established firms in the East and sold that inventory until their own stock could meet local demand. Even after they were propagating from their own plants, many continued to periodically order new or unusual varieties from growers in the East. Ezra D. Lay, a successful nurseryman from Ypsilanti, Michigan, exemplified this process. Lay and his brother came to Michigan Territory in the early 1830s to open a nursery. They surveyed settlement patterns in the southeastern portion of the Territory, settled on farmland near the village of Ypsilanti, and set about acquiring stock for their new enterprise. According to Lay's account of the

²³ For an evaluation of popular plants and garden designs in the mid-nineteenth century, see Cheryl Lyon-Jenness, *For Shade and For Comfort*, 53–86.

early days of his business, he purchased nearly twenty-five thousand plants, among them a variety of fruit trees, quinces, strawberries, grapes, and a "large assortment of ornamental shrubs, evergreens, roses, peonies, [and] herbaceous perennial flowering plants" from Asa Rowe's Monroe Gardens near Rochester, New York. In the fall of 1834, the Lay brothers built a small greenhouse, probably the first in Michigan, and just two years later, expanded the facility, quickly filling it with a "choice collection of tropical plants," presumably also purchased from eastern firms.²⁴

Once established, nurserymen often advertised large and very diverse inventories, but they did not always have the stock on hand to fill customer orders. To make up potential shortfalls, they depended upon wholesale exchange with other growers, sometimes within their own region and at other times from distant sources. Wholesale plant exchange offered several advantages to nurserymen. They could meet unexpected demand in local markets, they could offer a broader selection of plants than any one nursery might reasonably sustain, and they could quickly fill in gaps when regional weather conditions decimated inventories. John Kennicott's correspondence with a number of respected Illinois nurserymen indicates how the system worked within that state. In 1861, Illinois nurseryman Charles Hamilton wrote for "plum and pear trees . . . also silver maples, Japan lilies, tree peonies, Norway spruce, Balsam fir, weeping willow, Early Richmond and a few other dwarf cherries with some 200 apples," and then told Kennicott, "If there is anything in our list you want should be glad to send it."²⁵

While offering very real benefits for many nurserymen, this wholesale exchange of plant inventories also created problems. A plant misnamed or mistakenly labeled by an eastern firm or a regional grower could quickly spread throughout the horticultural network, disappointing fellow nurserymen and their customers years later when the tree finally fruited or the shrub flowered and revealed its identity.²⁶ Stock received through these wholesale networks might be smaller than specified, less vigorous, or even diseased, forcing the nurseryman on the receiving end to lose potential sales or provide customers with an inferior product. Pressures to take advantage of the ideal planting season also made this system of wholesale exchange dependent on a quick response

²⁴ For Lay's own account of the early years of his nursery, see J. C. Holmes, "The Early History of Horticulture in Michigan," *Collection and Researches Made by the Pioneer Society of the State of Michigan*, 2nd ed., vol. 10 (Lansing, 1908), 73.

²⁵ Charles Hamilton, Ridgefield, to JAK (10 Dec. 1861), KBP 1078.

²⁶ For a typical comment on this problem, see John Kennicott, "Valuable Notes on Fruit Culture in Northern Illinois," *Transactions of the Illinois State Agricultural Society*, vol. 3, 1857–58 (Springfield, 1859): 60.

to the initial request and rapid transport from the wholesale source to the nursery retailer. If the order arrived too late, local nurserymen might have to deal with indignant customers unwilling to risk late planting, and they might also be saddled with extra inventory to care for through the winter or during the droughts of summer.²⁷

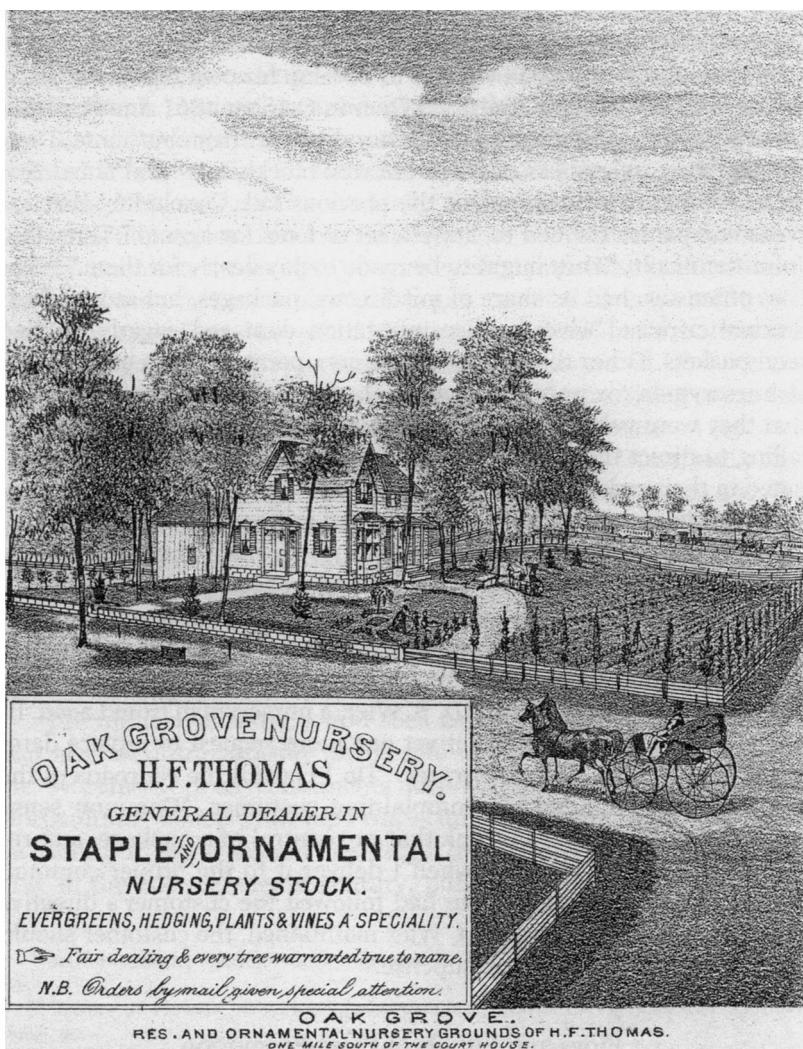
These networks of exchange depended on viable transportation links, and commercial horticulturists were quick to use expanding rail networks, newly developed express companies, and revised postal policies to expedite distribution of plants. Railroads provided a rapid means of transport, but at least in the early days of rail expansion, they had little facility for, or interest in, delivering the small packages typical of nursery orders. By the mid-1840s, express companies emerged to fill that niche, gradually expanding their networks, and enabling eastern nurserymen to reach midwestern customers quickly and safely. By the 1850s, firms like the American Express Company shipped merchandise from the East via western New York and the Great Lakes, and the United States Express Company began to move merchandise into the Midwest via the New York and Erie Railroad and other western rail systems. Starting along the West Coast, Wells, Fargo, and Company soon joined forces with eastern express companies, offering eastern and midwestern nurserymen access to western markets by both overland and water routes.²⁸

The United States postal service was not far behind. Hoping to remain competitive with the booming express industry, Congress passed postal regulations defining seeds or cuttings, in packages weighing less than eight ounces, as mailable matter in 1861. Postal rates were low, but they varied, depending on the distance a package was to be sent. In 1863, a new postal law mandated a uniform letter rate based on weight and regardless of distance and, for the first time, designated three classes of mail. Some printed items as well as "seeds, cuttings, bulbs, roots and scions" fell into the new category of third-class mail. The system reduced the postage rate on seeds and cuttings to \$.02 per four ounces and opened the mails to plant packages weighing up to four pounds. Recognizing that they could now get their merchandise to any customer who received mail, commercial horticulturists hailed the change in postal policy as a breakthrough for their industry.²⁹

²⁷ For a typical description of the problem, see O. B. Galusha, Lisbon, Illinois, to JAK (30 Apr. 1860), KBP 846.

²⁸ For an early history of the express industry see, Levi C. Weir, "The Express," in *One Hundred Years of American Commerce 1795-1895*, vol. 1, ed. Chauncey M. DePew (New York, 1895), 137-40; and Franklin W. Ball, "Just Express It," *Railroad Magazine* 47 (Oct. 1948): 94-103.

²⁹ See *United States Domestic Postage Rates, 1789-1956* (Washington, D.C., 1956), 33, 58-59; and Carl H. Scheele, *A Short History of the Mail Service* (Washington, D.C., 1970), 91.



The Oak Grove Nursery. Local nurserymen like H. F. Thomas of Jackson County, Michigan, urged customers to order by mail and frequently used the guarantee that trees were "true to name" as an advertising ploy to enhance sales. From *Combination Atlas Map of Jackson County, Michigan* (Chicago, 1874), 135.

Despite transportation advances, the system was not foolproof, and exasperated customers often complained of plants lost or damaged in transit, the cost of transporting live plants, or packaging charges, sometimes exceeding the cost of merchandise, unexpectedly added to their

bill.³⁰ The experiences of Henry A. Terry, a struggling nurseryman from Crescent City, Iowa, typified the problem. Terry had little choice but to send away for plants as he worked to develop his own nursery stock at the edge of the western frontier. When in October 1861 American Express sent his box of tulips to an agency depot far from his home, Terry cursed "the carelessness of those infernal blockheads" and noted that he had lost a similar shipment the previous fall. Concluding that express companies seemed to "have a set of fools for agents," Terry told John Kennicott, "They ought to be made to pay dearly for them."³¹ The post office also had its share of misdirected packages, but received additional criticism when a mice infestation damaged eagerly awaited seed packets. Other disgruntled customers pointed an accusing finger at nurserymen for poorly packaged plants, for sending orders so late that they were vulnerable to high or low temperatures in transit, or for failing to direct the plants through the transportation channels designated in their order.³²

Because so many hands were involved in transporting plants, frustrated customers often found it difficult to pinpoint the source of the problem. Most express companies refused to accept responsibility for loss or damage to goods, "unless [they were] properly packed and secured for transportation."³³ Nurserymen, in turn, bewailed customers who held them responsible for replacing plants that had been damaged after being too long in transit. D. B. Wier, a nurseryman from Lacon, Illinois, vented his annoyance at yet one more request to replace damaged plants in the *Prairie Farmer*. "Do I control the railroads of the country?" Wier chided his complaining customer. "Common sense would teach one I should think that my control of a package, and responsibility therefore cease when I deliver it to the proper common carrier." Since the nurseryman had followed the customer's directive regarding method of transport, Wier maintained, the customer should apply to the railroads for recompense.³⁴

Ploys and Pitfalls of Plant Promotion

Along with this tradition of exchanging nursery products over long distances, most larger nurseries and seed establishments depended on

³⁰ For an example of complaints about packing charges, see "Packing Charges by Nurserymen," *Gardener's Monthly* 16 (Sept. 1874): 277.

³¹ H. A. Terry, Crescent City, Iowa, to JAK (1 Oct. 1861), KBP 103; (31 Oct. 1861), KBP 1050; and (20 Mar. 1862), KBP 1171.

³² "Mice in the Post Office," *Gardener's Monthly* 9, no. 3 (Mar. 1867): 85; and Babcock and Brothers, Summerfield, Ill., to JAK (11 Apr. 1861), KBP 975.

³³ See, for example, United States Express Company Bill, (10 Oct. 1856), KBP 116.

³⁴ "Shipping Trees," *Prairie Farmer* 45 (13 June 1874): 186.

a widely dispersed consumer base, and as the nineteenth century wore on, increasingly communicated with distant customers through advertising or company catalogs. Early horticultural advertisements were usually simple “notices,” text-laden pieces that included the nursery or seed distributor’s name, location, and some mention of available goods, often with an invitation for the customer to come by and see the stock first hand.³⁵ Wordy notices gradually made room for company logos and other illustrations, and increasingly text was written to grab customers’ attention rather than to convey straightforward information. Typical of the practice, James Vick began an 1864 advertisement with the striking headline, “Lovers of Flowers, Attention!” in large, bold letters, adding in smaller type, “customers badly swindled.”³⁶ With the growth of the horticultural industry, horticultural advertising expanded and became pervasive. In the nationally circulated *American Agriculturist*, for example, advertisements for trees, flowers, fruits, and vegetables increased more than threefold between the late 1850s and the mid-1870s.³⁷ Horticulturists advertised in an array of publications, ranging from journals like the *Agriculturist* and widely read regional papers, such as the *Michigan Farmer*, the *Prairie Farmer*, or *Moore’s Rural New Yorker*, to local newspapers like the *Dexter Leader*, which was published weekly in Washtenaw County, Michigan, and had a circulation of six hundred subscribers.³⁸

The number of nursery and seed catalogs available to customers also increased dramatically in the mid-nineteenth century, but while the “wordiness” of advertisements declined, catalogs grew ever larger. Horticultural pioneers like the Prince Nursery of Long Island depended on catalog orders to sustain their large, diverse inventories, and, beginning in the late eighteenth century, published their own catalogs. In

³⁵ See for example, “Detroit Nursery” [advertisement], *Michigan Farmer* 10 (Apr. 1852): 126.

³⁶ “Lovers of Flowers, Attention!” [advertisement], *American Agriculturist* 23 (Mar. 1864): 90.

³⁷ See *American Agriculturist* 17 (Mar. 1858): 92–94; and *American Agriculturist* 23 (Mar. 1874): 109–20. A number of historians have documented the history of advertising and have emphasized its increasing importance in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, but almost without exception they have ignored the early advertising efforts of the horticultural industry and its effect on the establishment of a national market for horticultural goods. See, for example, Daniel Pope, *The Making of Modern Advertising* (New York, 1983); Charles A. Goodrum and Helen Dalrymple, *Advertising in America: The First 200 Years* (New York, 1990); Robert Jay, *The Trade Card in Nineteenth-Century America* (Columbia, 1987); James D. Norris, *Advertising and the Transformation of American Society, 1865–1920* (New York, 1990); and Frank Presbrey, *The History and Development of Advertising* (New York, 1929; reprint, 1968).

³⁸ See *Dexter Leader*, 15 Apr. 1869, 21 Feb. 1873, and 19 Mar. 1875. Circulation figures are drawn from “Table VI—Periodicals,” *Statistics of the State of Michigan Collected for the Ninth Census of the United States, June 1, 1870* (Lansing, 1873), 670–76.

1820, the Prince catalog listed hundreds of greenhouse plants, fruit trees, flowering roots, and bulbs available for sale, but included little additional horticultural information. While simple plant lists remained a staple in the trade during the first half of the nineteenth century, larger nursery and seed firms increasingly included descriptive information about specific varieties, broad suggestions about proper plant culture, and often special gardening “collections” that were guaranteed to add a note of good taste and refinement to the most modest households, all at very little cost.³⁹ By the mid-1860s, many commercial horticulturists also embellished plant descriptions and decorated their catalogs with at least some lithographic illustrations. Of the hundreds of nurserymen and seed dealers circulating catalogs by the mid-nineteenth century, Rochester seedsman James Vick emerged as a leader in catalog marketing. By the early 1870s, his lavishly illustrated catalogs provided information on plants in their native habitats, the origin of plant names, and specific directions for cultivating each variety listed, often totaling more than two hundred pages of horticultural information yearly.⁴⁰

The enhancement of both advertising and catalogs served several functions for the horticultural industry. Since the trade was dependent on customers’ buying goods “sight unseen,” both mechanisms were important vehicles for establishing familiarity and trust. Most commercial horticulturists developed a chatty tone in catalog prose, often making “a few friendly and familiar remarks” as they set the stage for what the catalog had to offer. Always a master at persuasion, James Vick engaged in what he termed “gossip with customers,” carrying on a casual and very personal conversation throughout the catalog. Both nurserymen and seed dealers often addressed their readers as “friends,” and many encouraged customers to see themselves among a select group who understood the value of plant culture.⁴¹ Some commercial horticulturists turned to local endorsements for their products, depending on customer comments to verify quality and trustworthiness. Nationally recognized seedsman Henry A. Dreer, for instance, made frequent use of testimonials, explaining that the technique enhanced the credi-

³⁹ For an early example of a catalog using the list form, see *Catalogue of Fruit and Ornamental Trees and Plants, Bulbous Flower Roots, Greenhouse Plants Etc., Cultivated at the Linnaean Botanic Garden, William Prince, Proprietor*, 22nd ed. (New York, 1823).

⁴⁰ For an example of Vick’s presentation and comments on the quarterly publication, see *Vick’s Floral Guide for 1875* (Rochester, N.Y., 1875), esp. 128, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Rush Rhees Library, University of Rochester, Rochester, N.Y.

⁴¹ See *Washburn and Co.’s Amateur Cultivator’s Guide to the Flower and Kitchen Garden* (1868), 11; and *Vick’s Illustrated Floral Guide for 1871* (Rochester, N.Y., 1871), 1, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Rush Rhees Library, University of Rochester, Rochester, New York.

bility of the firm. Expressions of satisfaction by far-flung customers, Dreer claimed, helped others to recognize the “practicability of packing and forwarding plants to a distance with safety.”⁴²

Detailed catalog information played another role for many commercial horticulturists. Although sources of practical advice were readily available to mid-nineteenth-century gardeners, journals and books required financial outlay. In contrast, customers could receive catalogs at no or minimal charge, often with the understanding that the cost of the catalog would be refunded with a purchase. Catalog producers also wanted to be sure that when a customer placed an order, he or she had appropriate cultural information in hand. With advice specific to their horticultural offerings or evaluations of “ease of culture,” nurserymen or seed dealers hoped to direct customers to appropriate choices and head off horticultural disasters that might reflect on the quality of their plants or seeds and generate complaints.⁴³ A beautiful floral display could function as a potent local endorsement, but conversely, news of unhealthy plants or inferior production could ripple through a neighborhood, souring the firm’s reputation and cutting demand for plants for years to come.

Despite their willingness to provide sound horticultural information, increasing competition induced some horticultural entrepreneurs to make ever stronger claims for the quality and beauty of their products. Early horticultural advertisements might well describe the size and quality of fruit or ornamental trees, but as the decades wore on, terms like “splendid profuse blooming,” “extremely beautiful and interesting,” “free-flowering, highly ornamental,” or “graceful and magnificent” often appeared as glowing endorsements of particular varieties.⁴⁴ In addition, both nurserymen and seed dealers introduced new plants as a way to ensure continued demand for ornamental plants. Descriptors like “unusual,” “new,” or “rare” joined the lexicon of promotional terms and added to the pressure on commercial horticulturists to carry the latest fashionable varieties. European growers were the typical source of new plants, and access to a reputable foreign supplier became

⁴² Vick’s *Illustrated Catalogue and Floral Guide for the Spring of 1865*, i–iv; *Catalogue of New and Rare Green House Plants, Evergreen Shrubs, Bedding Plants, Dahlias, Verbenas, Roses, Petunias, Fuchsias, Chrysanthemums, Phlox, Geraniums, Bulbs, Etc., Grown and For Sale by Hubbard and Davis* (Detroit, 1871), 8–9, Clarke Historical Library, Central Michigan University, Mount Pleasant, Mich.; and Dreer’s *Garden Calendar for 1868* (Philadelphia, 1868), National Agricultural Library, United States Department of Agriculture, Beltsville, Md.

⁴³ See, for example, *A Descriptive Catalogue of a Choice Collection of Flower, Vegetable and Agricultural Seeds Cultivated and For Sale by Benjamin K. Bliss* (Springfield, Mass., 1860), 46.

⁴⁴ See Washburn and Co.’s *Amateur Cultivator’s Guide to the Flower and Kitchen Garden* (1868), 42–43.

a selling point for many large American enterprises. In 1865, for example, Benjamin K. Bliss, a Springfield, Massachusetts, seedsman and florist with a national clientele, advertised “rare and beautiful flowers, splendid novelties never offered in the United States before.” Quality was assured, Bliss maintained, because the seeds came from the “most successful growers and Exhibitors in Europe.”⁴⁵

While these advertising ploys stimulated sales, they also created pitfalls for the industry. Untried novelties posed a particular problem. Some succumbed to harsh midwestern cultural conditions, while other new varieties succeeded all too well, quickly jumping the garden fence and establishing themselves as weedy intruders in cultivated fields or along roadsides. Most frequently, customers complained that, once planted, the novelties they had so eagerly ordered simply failed to measure up to their initial glowing appraisal. Typical of the concern, a Maryland gardener admitted that he had tried new tomato varieties because of “high praise” and had been disappointed in the results; he now begged for relief from further unjustified claims. “Cannot some plan be devised to put a stop to vegetable and fruit humbugging?” the disgruntled customer queried. “It puts money in the hands of unprincipled men to the serious cost and disappointment of the cultivator.”⁴⁶

Assertions that plants were easy to grow or that they would bloom profusely raised customer expectations and shifted the onus of blame for a disappointing yield or unhealthy plants to the supplier. Customers often read advertisements and catalog text carefully, and many believed the descriptions, no matter how inflated the claims. One pundit, voicing complaints about “fraud in seeds,” described the frustration his wife experienced as she, hoping to add variety to her bed of white and purple candy tufts, thoughtfully placed her seed order. “Seeing scarlet advertised,” his wife had “remitting the requisite number of postage stamps,” but received for her trouble “white and purple mixed.” Trying another source, she ordered “‘petunias, mixed,’ for bedding,” and suffered additional disappointment when “they all came up of one color.” Still optimistic, the faithful customer ordered dahlias, “described in catalogue as ‘very beautiful, making a fine assortment for a small border,’ ” but found to her dismay months later that all the tubers produced “dingy brown” flowers.⁴⁷

Whether composed of simple lists of plants or detailed accounts of varieties and their cultural needs, many nineteenth-century nursery and seed catalogs appeared to offer customers an amazing array of

⁴⁵ B. K. Bliss, [advertisement], *American Agriculturist* 24 (Mar. 1865): 93.

⁴⁶ Robert Sinclair, “Cook’s Favorite, Tilden and the Monumental Tomato Compared—Humbugs—Latakia (Turkish) Tobacco—Trellises,” *Gardener’s Monthly* 8 (Nov. 1866): 322.

⁴⁷ “Fraud in Seed,” *Horticulturist* 17 (Nov. 1862): 500.

horticultural choices. A gardener browsing through the *Michigan Farmer* in 1860, for example, might come across the “abridged catalog” of the long-established Detroit nursery firm, Hubbard and Davis. The firm’s reputation rested on a broad selection of fuchsias and verbenas, but the catalog also listed eighty-one rose varieties, nearly forty dahlias, and over a dozen Chinese chrysanthemums, along with many other ornamental trees, shrubs, and indoor plants.⁴⁸ While Hubbard and Davis may well have had plants in stock, anecdotal evidence suggests the commercial horticulturists could not always meet customer demand for the plants listed in their inventories. In 1847, for example, Daniel Cook of Jackson County, Michigan, described his experience with William Prince’s highly regarded Linnean Botanic Garden on Long Island. Basing his selections on Prince’s very comprehensive 1845–46 “General Catalogue,” Mr. Cook ordered pears, plums, and apples. When the order arrived, Cook was astonished to find fewer plants than he had ordered, substitutions that he had not requested, and as a final indignity, additional charges for the unwanted plants.⁴⁹ The problem continued for decades. In 1861, the *Horticultrist* lamented that the practice of substituting plants was rampant and sure to diminish the credibility of the nursery industry. If the purchaser authorized “substitution and duplication,” the *Horticultrist* maintained, the policy was warranted, but without permission the customer was sure to be “dissatisfied and annoyed,” and unlikely to place an order with the guilty party again.⁵⁰

First-Hand Sales Strategies

Although catalogs developed effective, if somewhat problematic, links with distant customers, horticultural firms also bolstered demand through first-hand customer contact. Nurserymen routinely developed networks of agents to represent their interests in regions far removed from the firm’s headquarters, often enlisting local shopkeepers, businessmen, or even farmers with horticultural proclivities to handle their tree, shrub, or flower inventories. Seldom traveling far from home, these agents typically used their roots within the local community to develop trust, and they usually generated business from friends and neighbors. They also established a variety of relationships with the home nursery. Some agents sold plants on commission, taking a portion

⁴⁸ “Abridged Descriptive Catalog of Fruit Trees, Ornamental Trees, Shrubs and Greenhouse Plants Cultivated and For Sale by Hubbard and Davis,” *Michigan Farmer* 2 (10 Mar. 1860): 76–77.

⁴⁹ Daniel Cook, “Wm. Prince & Co., and their Nursery,” *Michigan Farmer* 4 (Feb. 1847): 172–73.

⁵⁰ “A Word to the Trade,” *Horticultrist*, 16 (Jan. 1861): 9.

of the profits when the plants sold. Others bought nursery stock outright and then resold the merchandise at their own rates. Occasionally, local agents were simply avid horticulturists, anxious to spread interest in their region and very willing to take pay in plants or promote sales with no thought of compensation.⁵¹

Many established nurserymen actively recruited agents, for a reputable representative could validate their presence among distant customers, give them "eyes and ears" to evaluate demand and pricing, and even offer firsthand commentary on the competition. Typical of the practice, Illinois nurseryman John Kennicott established agents for his Grove Nursery throughout Illinois and in the adjoining states and territories to the west. One of his agents, William J. Green, a young lawyer and businessman from Chicago, attempted to supplement his income by selling plants on Kennicott's behalf in Green Bay, Wisconsin. Green, in one instance, warned Kennicott that local residents were likely to dig shade trees and conifers from the neighboring forest, making "richer finer varieties" more likely to sell than the "commoner kind."⁵²

Reputable agents like William Green were normally a real boon to the industry, but as the links stretched over ever greater distances or involved a proliferating network of individuals, the system could create headaches for the home nursery. Agents, themselves lacking horticultural experience, sometimes failed to properly tend the plants in their care and, as a result, delivered an inferior product to local customers. Errors in gauging local demand for particular varieties could leave customers without desired plants, or conversely, could saddle the agent with an excess inventory. Out from under the watchful eye of the home nursery, an unethical agent might boost prices, fail to provide adequate horticultural information to inexperienced customers, or perhaps inadvertently jumble horticultural varieties, so that eagerly awaited fruit trees or flowering roots were not "true to name." Responding to what they perceived as inferior goods, local customers might refuse delivery on plants they had ordered or neglect to pay the local agent for trees and flowers they had actually received, leaving both customer and agent with the sour taste of a deal gone bad.⁵³

Large eastern nursery firms like Ellwanger and Barry sometimes maintained regional agents, but many came to depend upon their own

⁵¹ See, for example, G. G. Burdick, Chicago, Illinois, to JAK (31 Aug. 1863), KBP 1716. Mr. Burdick wrote to inquire about a job with Mr. Kennicott and pointed out that he had been paid \$40 per month plus expenses for his labor with a Rochester nursery.

⁵² See William J. Green, Green Bay, Wisconsin, to JAK (15 July 1862), KBP 1420; (10 Apr. 1862), KBP 1240; (8 Mar. 1862), KBP 1141; and (27 Aug. 1856), KBP 104.

⁵³ For examples of problems with nursery agents, see W. B. Atkinson, Hamilton, Ill., to JAK (7 Sept. 1857), KBP 245; and (27 Dec. 1857), KBP 289; and John Bovee, Kankakee, Ill., to Charles Kennicott (12 Nov. 1856), KBP 127.

itinerant sales force to extend the nursery's reach into distant households. Like dry-goods or notions peddlers, these traveling agents moved over a vast territory, visited potential customers in their homes, and used their persuasive powers to sell trees and flowers. As employees of their respective home nurseries, itinerant nursery agents often worked on commission but were also paid expenses and a monthly salary. Most agents limited sales to stock from their employer's inventory. As a part of their relationship with the home nursery, these "official" agents usually received some horticultural training, enabling them to offer prospective customers sound advice on cultural techniques or the regional hardiness of specific plants. Many agents traveled the countryside in winter or early spring prior to the planting season, took orders for plants, and then returned to the home nursery to monitor their customers' orders. Once orders were filled, nursery agents supervised their distribution, either by delivering plants directly to customers, or by holding plants at a central location until customers could call for them. In most instances, nurseries employing an itinerant sales force filled customers' orders from their general inventory, and they understood that the company's reputation rested on healthy plants, accurately named. While not the first to establish an itinerant sales force, Ellwanger and Barry were firmly committed to the strategy by the 1840s. Others noted their success, and by the 1850s, traveling agents from a number of eastern nurseries competed with regional and local businesses for the midwestern plant trade. The sales strategy was so effective that many regional nurserymen were eventually forced to employ traveling agents in order to remain competitive.⁵⁴

Both the ubiquity of nursery agents and their apparent success drew the attention of individuals looking for a lucrative trade, and soon a varied group, hoping to benefit from the horticultural bonanza, roamed the midwestern countryside, promoting fruit trees and flower gardens. Lacking firm ties with any particular nursery and often derisively dubbed plant or tree peddlers, these "free agents" took orders throughout a region, often filling them with stock from whichever nursery was most convenient or offering the lowest wholesale prices.⁵⁵ Since

⁵⁴ See Diane Grosso, "From Genesee to the World," 7, 9–11; "American Horticulture," *Gardener's Monthly* 5 (June 1863): 175; and "Nurserymen's Association," *Prairie Farmer* 3 (19 May 1859): 311. For information on eighteenth-century plant peddlers, see Barbara W. Sandy, "Nurserymen and Seed Dealers in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake," *Journal of Garden History* 9, no. 3 (1989): 111–17.

⁵⁵ For a general background on types of peddlers and their techniques, see David Jaffee, "Peddlers of Progress and the Transformation of the Rural North, 1760–1860," *Journal of American History* 78 (Sept. 1991): 511–35. Several marketing historians have pointed out that shifts in marketing strategy, such as the introduction of nursery agents, are likely to occur when items are new, need special handling, or require individual contact with customers

neither the nursery nor the tree peddler expected to develop an ongoing relationship with customers, there was little incentive to supply robust plants or carefully named varieties. Also in contrast to agents of established firms, these self-employed plant peddlers seldom had undergone horticultural training and hence had little capacity for helping their inexperienced customers to make sound horticultural choices. Often obtaining what critics claimed were the “leavings” from commercial nurseries at low prices, tree peddlers could sell at prices well below those of established firms, and they quickly found a market for their goods among gardeners looking for inexpensive refinements. Some free agents combined strategies in order to shield deceptive practices behind a mask of respectability. “The most common mode of defrauding their customers,” the *American Agriculturist* explained in 1863, “is to get a certificate of agency from some respectable nursery, and do just enough business for that nursery to keep their agency good, and then to take orders and supply them with inferior and untrue trees picked up here and there at nominal prices.”⁵⁶

The horticultural industry routinely grumbled about the numbers and practices of free-agent plant peddlers, but at the same time it began catering to their needs. Advertisements directed to “persons selling, or about to sell trees in the west” were increasingly common in the 1860s and 1870s, often indicating that the nursery would “deal liberally” with any who called for plants.⁵⁷ Most large nurseries routinely offered plant peddlers wholesale prices on a selected group of plants. Typical of the practice, the Columbus Nursery featured plants suited to midwestern cultural conditions, and it provided agents with a list including nine species of evergreens, twelve deciduous ornamental trees, and eight types of ornamental shrubs, along with assorted roses, flowers, and greenhouse plants.⁵⁸

to convince them to buy. See Glenn Porter and Harold C. Livesay, *Merchants and Manufacturers: Studies in the Changing Structure of Nineteenth-Century Marketing* (Baltimore, 1971), 4; and Fred Mitchell Jones, *Middlemen in the Domestic Trade of the United States, 1800–1860* (Urbana, 1937), 61. Other historians have argued that the commercial drummer or traveling salesman replaced the peddler as an important marketing tool in the last decades of the nineteenth century. See Gerald Carson, “The Indomitable Peddler,” in *Readings in the History of American Marketing: Settlement to Civil War*, compiled by Stanley J. Shapiro and Alton F. Doody (Homewood, Ill., 1986), 328; Spears, *100 Years on the Road*, xi, 25–26; Stanley C. Hollander, “Nineteenth Century Anti-Drummer Legislation in the United States,” *Business History Review* 38 (Winter 1964): 480–81; and Bates Harrington, *How ‘Tis Done: A Thorough Ventilation on the Numerous Schemes Conducted by Wandering Canvassers together with the Various Advertising Dodges for the Swindling of the Public* (Chicago, 1879).

⁵⁶ “Beware of Traveling Tree Peddlers,” *American Agriculturist* 22 (May 1863): 186.

⁵⁷ “Dealers in Fruit Trees” [advertisement], *Michigan Farmer* 2 (7 Apr. 1860): 109.

⁵⁸ “1859–1860 Wholesale Catalogue of Fruit Trees etc. Cultivated and For Sale at the Columbus Nursery for the Fall of 1859 and the Spring of 1860” (Columbus, 1859), KBP 658.

Other firms specialized in enhancing plant peddlers' sales techniques. Because nursery agents did not carry plants with them while taking orders, illustrations depicting fruit types or the ornamental potential of flowers and shrubs were critical to plant sales. In the late 1850s, sensing a lucrative niche in the booming horticultural trade, a Rochester bookseller named Dallon Marcus Dewey began producing brightly colored illustrations of fruits, flowers, and ornamental trees that he termed "plates."⁵⁹ By the 1870s, the D. M. Dewey company offered over 2,300 illustrations, usually accompanied by at least some descriptive material and horticultural information. After nursery agents designated the plates they desired, Dewey offered several packaging options, such as boxes or a system of loosely connected plates that enabled the salesman to display a number of brightly colored illustrations to customers at the same time. Considering ease of transport, many agents opted for Dewey's convenient pocket-sized plate book, which he developed in the 1870s.⁶⁰ Soon, other Rochester firms were competing for the trade, and even a few midwestern nurserymen advertised colored plates and plate books for agents.⁶¹

To promote the booming plate-book trade even further, D. M. Dewey published *The Tree Agents' Private Guide* in 1875. The *Guide* urged agents to be honest with their customers, discussed appropriate behavior and appearance, provided some practical information on the care of plants, and even included a guide to the pronunciation of horticultural name and terms. Effective sales strategies were the real focus of the *Guide*, however, and Dewey encouraged plant peddlers to view interaction with customers as a finely tuned performance. A practiced agent, Dewey insisted, could exert a "mesmeric influence" over potential customers. Playing on customer pride, exploiting the colorful images in plate books, and weaving commentary about plantings already present in the customer's yard were surefire strategies for winning sales, Dewey claimed.⁶² In a world often devoid of colorful images, bril-

⁵⁹ D. M. Dewey, *The Tree Agents' Private Guide: A Manual for the Successful Work in Canvassing for the Sale of Nursery Stock* (Rochester, N.Y., 1875), 12.

⁶⁰ Karl S. Kabelac, "Nineteenth-Century Rochester Fruit and Flower Plates," *Library Bulletin* (University of Rochester), 35 (1982): 99, 93–94. For additional information on fruit and flower plates, see Charles Van Ravenswaay, *Drawn from Nature: The Botanical Art of Joseph Prestele and His Sons* (Washington, D. C., 1984); Charles Van Ravenswaay, *A Nineteenth-Century Garden* (New York, 1977); Charles Van Ravenswaay, "Drawn and Colored from Nature. Painted Nurserymen's Plates," *Magazine Antiques* 123 (Jan.–Mar. 1983): 594–99; and Carl W. Drepperd, "The Tree, Fruit and Flower Prints of D. M. Dewey, Rochester, New York from 1844," *Spinning Wheel* 12 (May 1956): 12–15, 46.

⁶¹ Kabelac, "Nineteenth-Century Rochester Fruit and Flower Plates," 94; and "Colored Plates of Fruits and Flowers" [advertisement], *Moore's Rural New Yorker* 21 (22 Jan. 1870): 63; "Colored Plates" [advertisement], *Michigan Farmer* 6 (9 Aug. 1860): 92.

⁶² Dewey, *The Tree Agents' Private Guide*, 7–29.

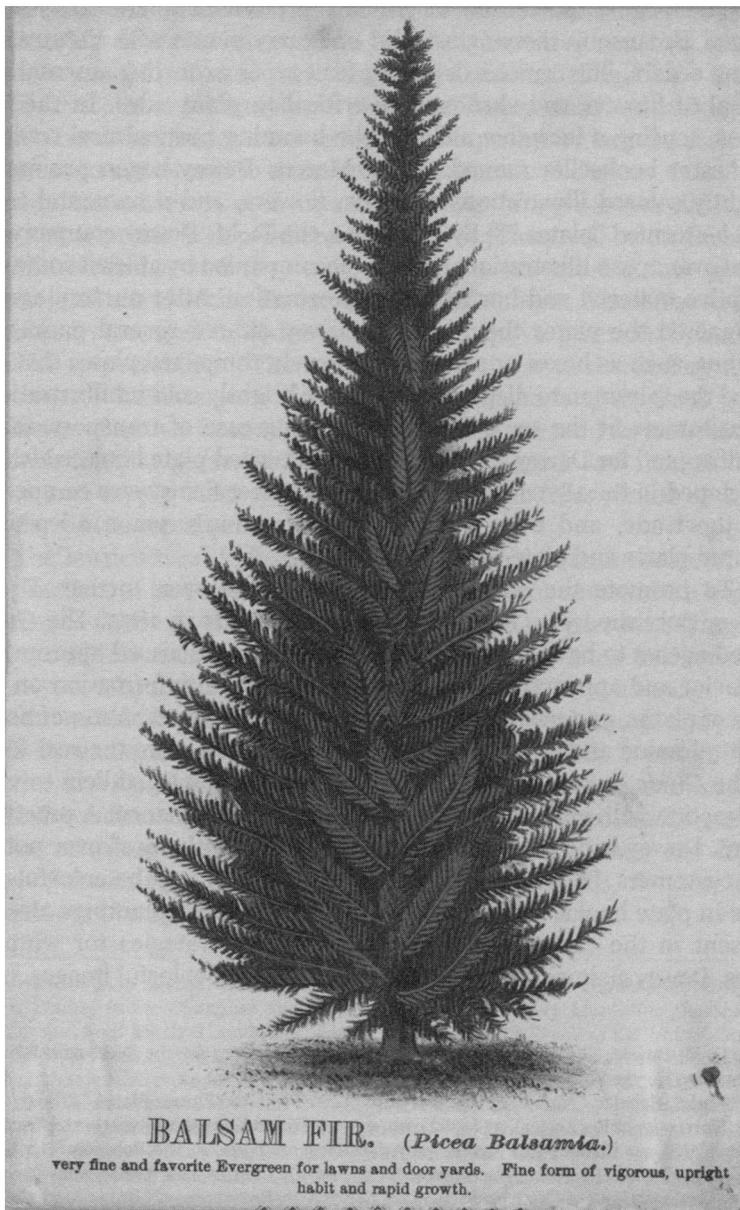


Plate-book illustration. To enhance sales of trees, shrubs, and flowers, nursery agents or tree peddlers often used commercially produced plate books. This plate, typical of those produced by the D. M. Dewey Company of Rochester, New York, combined an attractive image with at least some horticultural information. Original in Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, University of Rochester Library, Rochester, New York.

liant plates spread across a farmwife's kitchen table, coupled with a well-practiced sales pitch, gave itinerant plant peddlers a tremendous advantage. Perhaps enchanted by the beauty of the illustrations, customers placed orders with virtual strangers and with little consideration for cultural details or regional hardiness.

One reviewer described Dewey's *Guide* as containing some "excellent rules for the use and guidance of those who sell trees," but feared that those who "sold on deceptive principles" would not be swayed by arguments for honesty.⁶³ The concern proved prophetic, for plant peddlers soon came under fire for polished performances that misrepresented both their horticultural expertise and the goods they sold. In his 1879 critique of the traveling-agent industry, Bates Harrington warned readers to beware of "oily-tongued fellows with florid prints of impossible fruits faithfully depicted between richly bound lids." Worried that plate books gave plant peddlers an undeserved authority, Bates emphasized that anyone, no matter what his qualifications for selling plants, could obtain the colorful illustrations. Michigan horticulturist Dr. O. Marshall validated those concerns in remarks made before the Michigan Pomological Society in 1880. "They [tree peddlers] have an illustrated book from some nursery," Dr. Marshall complained, "and go over the country taking orders."⁶⁴

A slick sales strategy was only part of the problem. According to the horticultural and agricultural press, association reports, and the private writings of individuals who had been "badly gulled," tree peddlers were everywhere and really did perpetrate fraud.⁶⁵ In 1860, for example, Levi Thumb of Irving, Illinois, wrote John Kennicott that the "meanest agents" imaginable were in his area selling the "rubbish" of eastern firms. Several years later, a Fort Wayne, Indiana, nurseryman echoed the sentiment, telling Kennicott that his region was "swarming with tree peddlers," making it difficult for residents to avoid the persistent sales pitch, whether they wanted to buy or not.⁶⁶ Complaints about peddler numbers and poor-quality stock were most frequently expressed, but other concerns also surfaced in an ongoing tirade against these itinerant salesmen. The *American Agriculturist* reported a widespread scam involving blue roses and tree strawberries and cautioned readers to beware of peddlers in their region displaying pictures of "astonishing fruit."⁶⁷

⁶³ "The Tree Agents Private Guide," *Gardener's Monthly* 17 (Sept. 1875): 283.

⁶⁴ Harrington, *How 'Tis Done*, 246, 248; and "September Meeting," *Tenth Annual Report of the Secretary of the State Pomological Society of Michigan, 1880* (Lansing, 1881), 296.

⁶⁵ See, for example, J. A. Kimberly, Neenah, Wisc., to JAK (6 May 1862), KBP 1353.

⁶⁶ DeGraff Nelson and Company, Fort Wayne, Ind., to JAK (3 Mar. 1862), KBP 1132; Levi Thumb, Irving, Ill., to JAK (26 Feb. 1860), KBP 754.

⁶⁷ See "Dishonest Tree Agents," *Horticulturist* 26 (Mar. 1871): 45; and "Tree and Plant Swindlers," *American Agriculturist* 32 (Apr. 1873): 143.

Some peddlers seemed to prey on customers with at least some horticultural knowledge. In 1855, the *Horticulturist* published a commentary from a Germantown, Ohio, correspondent complaining that a salesman in the region was touting “peach trees as being worked on imported stocks of a kind exempt from the attacks of the Borer or Peach-Worm,” northern muscadine grapes as superior to any in cultivation, and a common rose purported to be a constant bloomer. All claims were false, the correspondent argued, yet “many people are induced to believe these false representations.”⁶⁸

Coping with Complaints

Controversy over plant peddlers underscored a problem at the heart of the mid-nineteenth-century horticultural boom. Proponents drew heavily on first-hand sales efforts, bold new advertising strategies, and advancing communication and transportation networks to stimulate horticultural interest and distribute plants far and wide. Their successful efforts drew new, often inexperienced customers into the horticultural marketplace, and also attracted the attention of potentially unprincipled competitors looking for quick profit. For all their success, the systems of plant advocacy, production, and distribution were not foolproof, and those inherent weaknesses, coupled with fraudulent practitioners and gullible consumers, soon generated a chorus of complaint. The same networks that had promoted horticultural interest now spread the word about the deceit and outright fraud being perpetrated within the industry. The tools, in other words, that were so critical to industry growth both engendered and communicated warnings about the problems that threatened to derail the horticultural boom. Whether based on fact or customer perception, accusations of deceptive practices had serious implications, and many within the trade turned their attention to protecting their interests and overcoming the often negative image of the horticultural industry.

What to do about these horticultural conundrums? Most reputable nurserymen and seed dealers understood the complexity of the issue, and in some instances, admitted that customer complaints were rooted in fact. As they accepted responsibility for very real problems within the industry and actively sought solutions, these commercial horticulturists often stressed the need to share information and pool their collective horticultural expertise. The horticultural and agricultural press was a likely conduit for this helpful information, and commercial horticulturists were among the most active supporters and contributors to

⁶⁸ “Imposition,” *Horticulturist* 10 (Mar. 1855): 142.

the medium's early proliferation. Well-known nurseryman and strawberry breeder Charles M. Hovey, for instance, founded the *Magazine of Horticulture, Botany, and All Useful Discoveries and Improvements in Rural Affairs* in 1835, and he continued to serve as editor until the influential publication merged with the *American Journal of Horticulture* in 1868. In 1846, nurseryman and landscape gardener Andrew Jackson Downing established the *Horticulturist and Journal of Rural Art and Rural Taste*. After Downing's death in 1852, a string of well-known horticulturists, including Patrick Barry of the prominent Rochester, New York, nursery firm, became the editor. In 1875, the *Horticulturist* merged with the *Gardener's Monthly*, a third influential horticultural journal, edited by Philadelphia nurseryman Thomas Meehan.⁶⁹

Other nurserymen edited the horticultural portions of widely circulated agricultural papers. In Michigan, for example, John C. Holmes, a Detroit nurseryman and later secretary of the Michigan State Agricultural Society, and S. B. Noble, the proprietor of a struggling nursery in Ann Arbor, Michigan, alternated as horticultural editor of the *Michigan Farmer*.⁷⁰ Illinois nurseryman John Kennicott was horticultural editor for the *Prairie Farmer* in the 1850s.⁷¹ Although these publications were written for a broad reading audience, they prided themselves on providing sound, practical information that could serve both the home gardener and the most experienced horticultural practitioner. On occasion, the topic at hand was of particular interest to commercial nurserymen and might consist of carefully reasoned advice for dealing with industry problems. Hoping to solve the ongoing dilemma of protecting live plant materials from unforeseen delays in transit, for example, a number of publications suggested ways to package plants for distant customers. "Millions of trees are annually transported from one place to another," the *American Agriculturist* noted in 1858, "of which a large number are injured more or less for want of proper taking up or packing." Urging nurserymen who sent plants to consider first wrapping the roots in damp moss and straw and then securely tying the bundle in a gunny sack bound with twine, the *Agriculturist* included an illustration of a "convenient and neat" parcel ready for safe transport. The *Michigan Farmer*, in turn, urged shippers to leave soil around the roots before bundling the plant in brown paper and encasing the entire

⁶⁹ Bailey, *The Standard Encyclopedia of Horticulture*, 1559, 1587–88; Hedrick, *A History of Horticulture in America*, 490, 496.

⁷⁰ See, J. C. Holmes, "Valedictory," *Michigan Farmer* 7 (1 Nov. 1849): 326; S. B. Noble, "To Our Horticultural Readers," *Michigan Farmer* 11 (Jan. 1853): 24; J. C. Holmes, "Salutatory," *Michigan Farmer* 13 (Jan. 1855): 12; and "Our Horticultural Department," *Michigan Farmer* 14 (Jan. 1856): 23.

⁷¹ John A. Kennicott, "Deprecatory," *Prairie Farmer* (Nov. 1853): 417.

package in "sheet lead such as tea chests are lined with."⁷² As just one of hundreds of topics routinely debated in the agricultural and horticultural press, information on plant packaging offered commercial horticulturists practical solutions to widespread industry problems.

In addition to using the press as a forum for discussion, many commercial horticulturists established both formal and informal organizations to serve industry needs. Beginning in the late 1840s, the Upper Midwest was a hotbed of this "association" enthusiasm, and prominent nurserymen were among the most active proponents of both agricultural and horticultural societies.⁷³ Typical of the region, Michigan's horticultural advocates made several attempts at organization before they finally created a sustainable society. Their efforts began in 1846, when Detroit nurserymen William Adair, E. G. Mixer, and John C. Holmes, and Canadian nurseryman James Dougall joined with interested home gardeners to form the Detroit Horticultural Society. Although never large, the Society managed to organize a number of notable plant exhibitions, before declining membership spelled its end in the early 1850s.⁷⁴ Several other organizational efforts sputtered along through the ensuing decades, but in 1870, commercial horticulturists and enthusiastic amateurs again joined forces to form the State Pomological Society of Michigan. Like their counterparts in Michigan, Illinois nurserymen, including John Kennicott, O. B. Galusha, and F. K. Phoenix, worked with other active proponents to establish the Illinois State Agricultural Society, the Illinois State Horticultural Society, the Northwestern Fruit Growers Association, and many county associations in the 1850s.⁷⁵ In both states, professional and amateur horticulturists used these associations to exchange information, enjoy society exhibitions, and establish links with others who shared their interests and concerns. These networks often extended throughout the region and across the nation, as widely known horticulturists, like George Ell-

⁷² See "Taking Up and Packing Trees and Plants," *American Agriculturist* 17 (Apr. 1858): 117; and "How to Send Plants by Post," *Michigan Farmer* 11(1853): 318.

⁷³ For information on the formation of other midwestern organizations, see Bailey, *The Standard Cyclopedie of Horticulture*, 1553–55; and "State Agricultural Associations," *Transactions of the Illinois State Agricultural Society*, vol. 1, 1853–1854 (Springfield, 1855), 10–23.

⁷⁴ For a general account of the history of the Detroit Horticultural Society, see Holmes, "The Early History of Horticulture in Michigan," 75–79. The Society's preamble and constitution were reprinted, along with a description of the founding by J. C. Holmes, in "May Meeting," *Second Annual Report of the Secretary of the State Pomological Society of Michigan, 1872* (Lansing, 1873), 96–103.

⁷⁵ For information on other Illinois horticultural activists, see Erik A. Ernst, "John A. Kennicott of The Grove, Physician, Horticulturist, and Journalist in Nineteenth-Century Illinois," *Illinois State Historical Society Journal*, vol. 74 (1981): 109–18; Richard Bardolph, *Agricultural Literature and the Early Illinois Farmer* (Urbana, 1948), esp. ch. 2, 49–89.

wanger and Patrick Barry of New York or Ohio horticulturist and nurseryman Marshall B. Bateham, made it their business to attend state and regional association meetings and share pertinent information and expertise.⁷⁶

Associations offered members a viable conduit for information, but they also served other, less obvious purposes. In associations where, for example, professional horticulturists mingled with amateur cultivators, the active participation of nursery- or seedsman made their presence known to perspective customers and established a basis for ongoing business transactions. Commercial horticulturists also used organization as a way to focus on industry practice and problems, and as the century wore on, established a number of associations geared to their business interests. Working through these societies, commercial horticulturists were able to set standards, offer professional benchmarks for industry practice, and, in some instances, regulate how business was conducted. John Kennicott's report on the 1849 meeting of the National Convention of Fruit Growers held in Buffalo, New York, suggests just how the process worked. Kennicott told readers of the *Prairie Farmer* that the nation's most experienced horticulturists were in attendance, "freely exchanging opinions, and in an easy conversational style, giving the results of their varied and extensive experience." Among their discussions, convention-goers had agreed to examine fruit varieties and establish a list of their preferences. This seemingly objective appraisal of fruit quality, Kennicott insisted, was critical to supplanting the "vanity of their originators or disseminators" as an industry standard and would help nurserymen weed out "hundreds of 3d and 4th rate fruits" crowded into "every nursery catalogue." Ostensibly, the "select list" of apples, pears, peaches, plums, and cherries offered customers the best the trade had to offer, but there was another side to the issue. In establishing a professional norm based on the opinion of association insiders, not only varieties but also their "originators and disseminators" were cast aside, creating a clear boundary between those who adhered to professional standards and those who did not.⁷⁷

A similar desire to establish normative industry practices and standards spurred southern Michigan nurserymen to organize the Michigan Nurserymen's and Fruit Growers' Association in the mid-1850s. While members agreed to share information on grafting techniques, proper time for pruning, fruit varieties most suitable to varied soil types, and many other topics, the organization focused on regularizing

⁷⁶ See, for example, M. B. Bateham, "Floriculture for the Million," *Second Annual Report of the Secretary of the State Pomological Society of Michigan*, 1872 (Lansing, 1873), 416.

⁷⁷ J. Kennicott, "The Late Pomological Convention at Buffalo," *Prairie Farmer* 9 (Jan. 1849): 24–25.

the regional nursery trade. Association members discussed the need for pricing schedules and considered appropriate strategies for controlling competition, especially from eastern plant peddlers.⁷⁸ While short lived, the Michigan Nurserymen's Association foreshadowed efforts to control industry practice through organization and cooperation and pointed to a general trend toward the thoroughly professional trade associations that would emerge in the mid-1870s. Illinois nurserymen made a similar effort in the 1850s, meeting to discuss fruit varieties and the depredations of tree peddlers. In the 1860s, Illinois nurseryman F. K. Phoenix called for additional organization, advocating a "trade circular" to communicate information about plant inventories within the region and to help participating nurserymen set fair and competitive prices for their nursery stock. Professional horticulturists were finally successful in their efforts to establish a long-lasting trade association with the organization of the American Association of Nurserymen in 1876. The Association began publishing "proceedings" in 1880, and the horticultural and agricultural press frequently reported on its activities. Early on, the Association cited industry practice as an important means of combating fraud and urged nurserymen to "equalize prices," develop "careful culture of specialties in the trade," promote only novelties that merited widespread planting, and control the grading and labeling of trees at the home nursery.⁷⁹

Finding a Scapegoat

As commercial horticulturists involved themselves in associations, they inevitably developed bonds of friendship with others who shared their interests or their business concerns. Among John Kennicott's many correspondents, William Robert Prince, an expert on grape culture and the proprietor of one of the oldest nurseries in the nation, typified this blending of business and camaraderie in his letters. In 1862,

⁷⁸ For an account of the Association, see Holmes, "The Early History of Horticulture in Michigan," 79–83; and "Constitution of the Michigan Nurserymen's and Fruit Growers' Association," J. C. Holmes Papers, 1849–1854, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library, Detroit, Michigan. See also "To Nurserymen and Fruit Growers," *Michigan Farmer* 13 (Jan. 1855): 13; and Bailey, *The Standard Cyclopedia of Horticulture*, 1553.

⁷⁹ "Nurserymen's Association," *Prairie Farmer* 3 (19 May 1859): 311; "The Nursery Trade," *Prairie Farmer* 14 (26 Nov. 1864): 340; and "Methods of Selling Nursery Stock, *Ninth Annual Report of the Secretary of the State Pomological Society of Michigan, 1879*" (Lansing, 1880), 306–7. For historical background on the development and importance of trade associations, see Louis Galambos, "The American Trade Association Movement Revisited," in *Trade Associations in Business History*, eds. Hiroaki Yamazaki and Matao Miyamoto (Tokyo, 1988), 121–35; Joseph F. Bradley, *The Role of Trade Associations and Professional Business Societies in America* (University Park, Md., 1965); and Joseph Henry Froth, *Trade Associations, Their Services to Industry* (New York, 1930).

Prince wrote Kennicott describing his “postulates” on floral structure and asking Kennicott to comment. The letter’s focus then shifted to personal concerns. Prince noted that he, like Kennicott, had a son in the army and that the family had sent the young man “a large plum pudding for Christmas.”⁸⁰ A similar balance between business and friendship characterized Kennicott’s correspondence with many mid-western horticultural advocates and nurserymen. Beginning his letters with the business at hand, Illinois horticulturist Jonathan Baldwin Turner, for instance, notified Kennicott when he received the *Transactions* of the State Agricultural Society, commented on its contents, and described his son’s success in selling Osage-orange hedge plants to regional farmers. “I almost forgot to say that our youngest 2 years old [sic] ‘Freddy’ has been dreadfully sick—had scarlet fever and then lung fever,” Turner wrote in February 1858, ending his letter with this mention of his private affairs.⁸¹ Such intimate details, seemingly irrelevant to the horticultural industry, were in fact critical indicators of well-established ties, trust between correspondents, and deep affection. These men knew each other, shared philosophical ideals and business goals, and could vouch for the integrity of any colleague who came under fire.

These expanding networks, fostered through associations and enhanced by personal ties and friendships, offered commercial nurserymen another tool in combating fraud and in controlling their own profession. Membership in associations signaled a shared set of values, whether concern for improving industry practice or a willingness to communicate knowledge and horticultural expertise. Familiarity and common interest enabled network members to evaluate the integrity and business acumen of others and offered a concrete means of distinguishing reputable nurserymen and seed dealers from traders who were simply interested in financial gain. Once commercial horticulturists had a means to define reputable practitioners, it did not take long to transfer blame for fraudulent practices to dealers who failed to share their values and did not belong. The industry pointed an accusing finger in many directions, placing the burden of guilt on unethical nurserymen, on wily seed dealers, or perhaps most frequently, on the ubiquitous tree peddlers.

In 1862, a “nurseryman,” commenting in the *Horticulturist*, described just how he perceived this scapegoating process. There were long-standing problems in the trade and misconduct among some nurserymen, the commentator admitted, but “there is one source of evil, which, when understood, will relieve some of us from these severe

⁸⁰ William R. Prince, Flushing, N.Y., to JAK (10 Jan. 1862), KBP 1098.

⁸¹ J. B. Turner, Jacksonville, Ill., to JAK (23 Feb. 1858), KBP 321.

charges. I mean the tree peddlers [sic].”⁸² Horticultural associations were all too willing to help their members and the public understand the connections. Ranging from small local organizations like the Adrian (Michigan) Horticultural Society to the nationwide American Association of Nurserymen, these groups busied themselves in drawing up resolutions that linked tree peddlers to industry fraud and broadly condemned deceptive practices. A resolution passed by the Illinois State Horticultural Society in 1867 reflected the industry perspective. “The progress of horticulture has been very much impeded by tree peddlers, through their ignorance and dishonesty,” Society members proclaimed, and then resolved “that this Society, as a body of fruit-growers, farmers, legitimate nurserymen and others, do emphatically denounce the business.”⁸³

If defining the reputable was to help in combating fraud, commercial horticulturists needed ways to both distinguish the good from the bad, and to communicate legitimacy to their colleagues and customers. As one wary nurseryman noted, it was important to “brand the swindler in such plain characters that all may know and avoid him.”⁸⁴ For some nurserymen and seed dealers, the most obvious place to start was within their own businesses, and many developed policies designed to preserve their good reputation. Some simply tried to ensure that their traveling sales force or local agents were men of good character. Michigan fruit grower and nurseryman Theodatus T. Lyon provided clear direction in response to a prospective agent’s request for employment. “Our rule is strait dealing,” Lyon wrote, “so that persons dealing with us once will find it for their interest to try us again and we desire such persons as agents as will command the confidence of the public.”⁸⁵ Other nurserymen, like John Kennicott, drew on their own network of friends and business associates to verify the character of potential local agents.⁸⁶ In addition, many established nurseries supplied their agents with an official designation, which might be signed certificates, printed order forms bearing company logos, or personalized plate books that confirmed the agent’s official identity. The American Association of Nurserymen

⁸² “Mr. Editor,” *Horticulturist* 17 (Nov. 1862): 528.

⁸³ “Bad for Tree Peddlers,” *American Agriculturist* 26 (Feb. 1867): 50. See also “The Adrian Horticultural Society,” *Horticulturist* 10 (Mar. 1855): 151–52. A number of historians have commented on this process of defining itinerant salesmen as disreputable. See, for example, Spears, *100 Years on the Road*, 55.

⁸⁴ “Mr. Editor,” *Horticulturist* 17 (Nov. 1862): 528.

⁸⁵ T. T. Lyon, South Haven, Mich., to Webster Cook, Saline, Mich., 13 July 1874, T. T. Lyon Letterbook, vol. 1, collection 345, Historical Collection and Archives, Michigan State University, East Lansing.

⁸⁶ See, for example, J. B. Hunt, Tuscola, Ill., to JAK (22 Dec. 1862), KBP 1506; George H. Work, Carlinville, Ill., to JAK (7 May 1862), KBP 1357; and B. C. Church, Odell, Ill., to JAK (3 July 1863), KBP 1695.

condoned the practice and urged members to authorize, by proper certification, the legitimate agents who represented their firms.⁸⁷

To communicate their integrity to customers, many commercial horticulturists sought external verification and turned to the horticultural and agricultural press as a particularly potent tool for conferring legitimacy. Some editors were themselves involved in the nursery trade or the seed business. Others were avid supporters of agricultural and horticultural societies, and through these associations came to know the reputation of commercial horticulturists. Most editors had firm ties to local communities, or if catering to a larger reading audience, the respect and trust of their readership. To bolster advertising effectiveness and ensure customer confidence, some journal editors claimed knowledge of their advertisers and vowed "not [to] print a nursery advertisement in 'our paper' for any man whom we cannot recommend, as both 'honest and capable.'"⁸⁸ Typically, newspaper or journal editors enhanced the credibility of advertisements even further by discussing them in one of the nonadvertising sections of the paper. In 1858, for example, the *Michigan Farmer* "called attention" to the advertisements of William Adair, Hubbard and Davis, and Ellwanger and Barry, urged subscribers to read the ads, and then appended personalized notes of approval for the firms and their merchandise. To encourage this familiarity, nurserymen and seed dealers also routinely sent copies of their catalogs to newspaper and journal offices, hoping for a positive appraisal of both the catalog and the firm from the respected editor.⁸⁹

Not all press appraisals were based solely on personal knowledge or a firm's solid reputation, however. Newspapers and journals gained valuable income from advertising dollars, and hence had a stake in the ongoing success of firms that purchased advertising space. Commercial horticulturists, in turn, certainly understood the power of the press to promote their cause and substantiate their credibility, and some rewarded editors who "puffed" their products. The practice of distributing free seeds and plants to newspaper editors was common, and as a letter to John Kennicott revealed, definitely had an effect on the attitude and opinions of the lucky recipients. Kennicott advertised his nursery

⁸⁷ For examples of industry practice, see "Abridged Catalogue of Select Fruit and Ornamental Trees, Cultivated and Sold by Ellwanger and Barry," Rochester, N.Y., 1860, Ellwanger and Barry Company Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Rush Rhees Library, University of Rochester, Rochester, N.Y.; and Truett's Sons and Morgan, "Nursery Agents and Tree Peddlers," *American Agriculturist* 34 (Oct. 1875): 383; "Methods of Selling Nursery Stock," *Ninth Annual Report of the Secretary of the State Pomological Society of Michigan*, 1879 (Lansing, 1880), 307.

⁸⁸ "Advertisements," *Michigan Farmer* 4 (June 1846): 56; and "Our Nursery Advertisements," *Michigan Farmer* 11 (Mar. 1853): 81.

⁸⁹ See, for example, "Horticultural Notes," *Michigan Farmer* 16 (Mar. 1858): 80; and "The Toledo Nurseries," *Michigan Farmer* 15 (Mar. 1857): 89.

in the Chicago *Evening Journal*, and in 1862 the editor, John L. Wilson, made a specific request of the nurseryman. "If you can send me some hardy roses for my own front yard I would like them," Mr. Wilson wrote. "Send to 50 Dearborn Street, Journal Office." Assuring Kennicott that he had taken appropriate editorial action, Wilson pointed out, "I gave the [nursery] prospectus a ventilation and administered a kick to the tree pedlars [*sic.*]."⁹⁰

For some, internal checks or press approbation were simply not adequate, and as a Canadian nurseryman told readers of the *Horticultrist* in the mid-1850s, a "register of the trade" was needed to combat deceptive practices and undermine disreputable competitors. A system that listed established firms with a sound reputation, this nurseryman noted, had effectively quelled claims of fraud in the British horticultural trade.⁹¹ In the next several decades, concerned horticulturists experimented with a number of "registries" meant to define the reputable. In some instances, these lists were clearly designed to serve the internal needs of the horticultural industry. To protect themselves from agents or nurserymen who did not meet their credit obligations, mid-western nurserymen established a "Nurserymen's Protective Association" in the early 1870s, and developed a comprehensive list of "all horticulturists with the standing and strength of each as far as known." The results, a satisfied member explained, were critical to the economic health of the industry, because "it is absolutely useless for a dead-beat to apply for credit." Honest dealers who paid their bills benefited, for now they could secure credit "with out any reference whatever." Finding the registry idea useful, a number of state horticultural and agricultural societies, along with commercial publishers, began to produce horticultural trade lists to familiarize both colleagues and customers with respectable practitioners.⁹²

Blaming Customers

The efficacy of trade lists in protecting customers from fraud was based on one important assumption. Horticultural proponents presumed

⁹⁰ John L. Wilson, Chicago, Ill., to JAK (27 March 1862), KBP, 1193.

⁹¹ "Nurseryman's Reputation," *Horticultrist* 10 (June 1853): 293.

⁹² See for example, Chicago, "Nurserymen's Protective Associations," *Gardener's Monthly* 17 (Apr. 1875): 126; and O. B. Galusha, "Nurseries of Illinois," *Transactions of the Illinois State Agricultural Society*, vol. 3, 1857–1858 (Springfield, 1859), 372–77. See also "Horticultural Register 1867, of Nurserymen, Fruit-Growers, Agents, Dealers and Publishers," *Transactions of the Illinois State Horticultural Society for 1866* (Chicago, 1867), 109–22; "List of the Principal Nurserymen, Florists, and Seedsmen," *American Horticultural Annual* 1867 (New York, 1867), 147; and "Nurserymen, Florists, Seedsmen, and Dealers in Horticultural Stock," *American Horticultural Annual* 1871 (New York, 1871), 140–52.

that customers would read the list, accept the recommendations, and use the knowledge they had acquired to spend their horticultural dollars wisely. Home gardeners and orchardists, in other words, were important players in the campaign against horticultural fraud. To function effectively as a front-line defense, horticultural consumers needed to share the values long promoted by the established horticultural industry. Once again, knowledge and an appreciation for business integrity were critical, and horticultural proponents worked as diligently to push those concepts as they did to sell trees and flowers. To aid in the process, the agricultural and horticultural press stood ready to provide both practical advice and timely warnings. “If nurserymen would guard themselves against swindlers,” the *Gardener’s Monthly* boldly proclaimed in 1869, “the best thing they could do, would be to induce all those over whom they had any influence to subscribe to agricultural or horticultural papers.” The editor of the *Prairie Farmer* agreed, and noted in 1873, “There are a great many thousand farmers in Illinois who have never seen an agricultural paper [italics in original], and these are willing prey to all kinds of horticultural and agricultural swindles.” While the horticultural and agricultural journals obviously benefited from the increased readership they advocated, many commercial nurserymen agreed with their brethren in the press. In 1880, summing up decades of promotion, the American Association of Nurserymen pinpointed consumer education “as the most important factor in mitigating and remedying the evils complained of in regard to the dissemination of nursery products.”⁹³

The strategy of encouraging knowledgeable, forward-looking customers entailed placing the emphasis on several educational themes. Many proponents stressed the point that well-informed customers would understand horticultural techniques, consider regional environmental demands, and have reasonable expectations for the plant varieties they selected. Through their own informed choices, in other words, customers could avoid the many problems they so frequently complained about, or they could at least discover the source of their difficulties. Increasingly, detailed nursery and seed catalogs, horticultural and agricultural papers, advice columns in local papers, and association reports were filled with pertinent cultural tips, appraisals of suitable varieties, and strategies to maximize horticultural success.

Hoping that horticultural awareness might also encourage a greater understanding of the industry and its challenges, commercial horticul-

⁹³ “Protection Against Horticultural Swindlers,” *Gardener’s Monthly* 11 (June 1869): 182; “Swindle,” *Prairie Farmer* 44 (1 Feb. 1873): 34; and “Convention of American Association of Nurserymen,” *Moore’s Rural New Yorker* 39 (3 July 1880): 442.

turists sometimes attempted to explain the trade to customers. John Kennicott, for instance, tackled the issue of nursery substitutions in plant orders. An occasional “run” on certain varieties, Kennicott told readers of an 1853 *Prairie Farmer* article, could make it impossible to fill customer orders precisely, despite the nurseryman’s best efforts to gauge demand. “When you send an order to a nurseryman for trees, and especially if you intend only ‘large trees,’ ” Kennicott implored, “always give him some lee way, or liberty of substitution.” John C. Holmes, horticultural editor of *Michigan Farmer*, tried a similar approach, explaining to prospective customers that it was “an easy matter for [nurserymen] to make mistakes, and exceedingly difficult to avoid them.” Nurserymen, Holmes pointed out, “handl[ed] a great number of varieties of the same article and their sales being huddled into a few weeks . . . renders impossible that leisure and circumspection which can be given to ordinary trade.” Holmes and other horticultural advocates wanted customers to understand that what at first glance might appear fraudulent was, in fact, part of the reality of doing business in a very complex trade. Voicing a widespread industry perspective, Holmes pleaded for tolerance and reasonable expectations, urging customers to “be charitable then, and do not call every error a trick or a cheat.”⁹⁴ Needless to say, what may have been deemed an honest mistake among reputable nurserymen was not viewed so charitably when perpetrated by dealers operating outside the horticultural network.

Horticultural advocates also presumed that alert, well-educated customers were far less likely to be duped by unethical nursery agents or wily seed dealers. Using their own base of knowledge, these customers could distinguish honest mistakes, discriminate between valid and exaggerated claims, and evaluate the practices and promotional strategies of any given horticultural enterprise. Most critically, through reading agricultural or horticultural papers or by becoming members of associations, potential horticultural customers joined the broad network of the reputable and directed their horticultural business to names they knew and trusted. In case customers failed to get the message, the press and association reports were filled with warnings, exhorting customers to buy from trustworthy sources. “Never buy trees of a peddler,” John Kennicott told members of the Illinois State Agricultural Society in 1860. “Buy your trees of the regular, educated nurseryman, near you, or order them from a distant one, in whom you have confidence.” Summing up decades of educational efforts, seedsman James Vick noted that “the agricultural and horticultural press has long advised planters

⁹⁴ J.A.K., “To Purchasers of Fruit Trees,” *Prairie Farmer* 13 (Jan. 1853): 5; and J. C. Holmes, “Itinerant Fruit Tree Peddlers,” *Michigan Farmer* 13 (Aug. 1855): 245.

to be careful of whom they ordered trees, and to deal only with responsible nurserymen, or their agents.”⁹⁵

The argument that educated customers could avoid horticultural fraud was only a short step away from blaming persons who complained for their own gullibility and victimization. H. Dale Adams, a southern Michigan nurseryman, minced few words in reprimanding local farmers both for the proliferation of disreputable nursery agents, whom he labeled with the nickname “Alias,” and for their own horticultural problems. “Your own negligence, your own lack of interest to your own wants and needs, in not sending or going to the proper places, the nurseries of our country for a supply,” Adams declared, “is just what has sent this man *Alias* to your door.” Other nurserymen agreed. Proprietors of an Adrian, Michigan, nursery explained to potential customers, “When you buy trees that have been carted around or brought from the East, you are throwing away your money and you ought to know it by this time.” Although he was more diplomatic, James Vick emphasized the same message. When it came to industry fraud, Vick maintained, consumers were “left to the protection of [their] own wits from the tender mercies of speculators.” Those who failed to cultivate their “wits” in an appropriate manner were, however, accountable for their own ignorance and concomitant vulnerability.⁹⁶ Vick also pointed out that customers did, in fact, encourage dishonesty and fraud by placing their horticultural dollars in the wrong hands. “The people,” this well-respected seedsman lamented, “will continue to encourage dishonesty by purchasing the worthless wares of these swindlers, while for the honest dealer, who tries to tell the exact truth about his goods, they will not have a dollar to spare.” According to Vick and others who had so dutifully tried to educate potential customers, there was only one reasonable conclusion to the ongoing problem. “Truly,” James Vick declared, “many people like to be humbugged,” and there was little that reputable horticulturists could do about it.⁹⁷

Conclusion

For many mid-nineteenth-century horticulturists, the failure of customers to heed their advice called their entire strategy for industry

⁹⁵ John Kennicott, “Orchards in Illinois,” *Transactions of the Illinois State Agricultural Society*, vol. 4, 1859–1860 (Springfield, 1861), 329; and “October, 1879,” *Vick’s Illustrated Monthly Magazine* 2 (Oct. 1879): 289.

⁹⁶ H. Dale Adams, “Fruit Culture on the Farm,” *Sixteenth Annual Report of the Secretary of the State Board of Agriculture of the State of Michigan*, 1877 (Lansing, 1878.), 321; “Hints to the Purchasers of Trees, Seeds, &c.,” *Horticulturist* 10 (1 July 1855): 250; and “Roses, Roses, Roses” [Loud and Trask advertisement], *Adrian Times and Expositor* (26 Mar. 1870).

⁹⁷ “October, 1879,” *Vick’s Illustrated Monthly Magazine* 2 (Oct. 1879): 289; and “The Blue-Rose Fraud,” *Vick’s Illustrated Monthly Magazine* 2 (June 1879): 184.

control and improvement into question. As they attempted to cope with customer dissatisfaction, nurserymen and seed dealers struggled to strike a reasonable balance between accepting responsibility for persistent problems and deflecting blame for horticultural humbugs onto disreputable practitioners. Commercial horticulturists saw unethical nurserymen or wily plant peddlers both as threats to the horticultural boom and as competitive challenges to their own pocketbooks, and in their efforts to overcome the problems, promoted knowledge and professional integrity as panaceas for industry ills. For those strategies to have the desired effects, however, proponents needed to communicate the issues and solutions effectively to prospective horticultural customers. To combat fraud or its specter, in other words, commercial horticulturists had to sell a set of values and train their newly minted customers to be discerning horticultural consumers. They hoped that as individuals learned the lessons and bought into the ideology, they would allocate their support and dollars appropriately. When it became increasingly evident that, as James Vick claimed, people liked to be "humbugged," professional horticulturists learned an important lesson. The expansion of consumer culture brought people of varied rank and circumstances into the marketplace, but it did not guarantee that they had horticultural expertise, valued personal integrity, or even shared a true interest in trees and flowers. In the end, commercial horticulturists faced a stark reality. Although they might be able to improve industry practice through shared knowledge or common values, there was little they could do to rein in their newly democratized customer base.

How could the horticultural trade and its contentious customers resolve their differences? Horticultural customers certainly continued to complain, and the industry continued to cope with the problems of producing and transporting fragile plant materials, but both the horticultural bonanza and the virulent controversies that accompanied it seemed to diminish as the nineteenth century drew to a close. Garden historian Charles Van Ravenswaay has noted the change, pointing out that although gardening interest continued, much of the "creativity and excitement" that characterized horticultural practice at midcentury simply dissipated. In part, enthusiasm may have diminished as committed proponents like John Kennicott or George Ellwanger faded from the scene, replaced by businessmen who lacked the ideological fervor of the founding generation and their strong ties of personal friendship. The transition from bonanza to more moderate growth also reduced the temptation for seekers of quick economic gain to enter the horticultural trade, eliminating a major source of industry conflict. Evolving industry practice also helped to quell the chorus of complaints. By the turn of the century, for example, the use of nursery agents and traveling

plant peddlers had declined, eventually limiting both their potential for deceit and the number of new customers that they, by their personal powers of persuasion, brought into the horticultural marketplace.⁹⁸ In addition, commercial horticulturists increasingly turned to professional associations, rather than to societies whose members combined commercial and amateur horticulturists, for help in defining normative industry practice. Initiated in this period of commercial transition, the American Association of Nurserymen enjoyed an expanding membership and continued to serve the needs of commercial horticulturists throughout the twentieth century, spawning, in the process, several additional organizations with even more specialized goals. This continued professionalization made it far more difficult for fly-by-night ventures to gain a foothold in the trade and concentrated collective resources on solving specific industry problems.⁹⁹

Most significantly, perhaps, the “newness” of commercial relations that characterized the early stages of America’s horticultural bonanza simply wore off, encouraging both industry professionals and their customers to develop more reasonable expectations for their horticultural transactions. Many customers, after all, had placed orders for trees and flowers with nurserymen long before they routinely sent off for merchandise from distant suppliers like Montgomery Ward or Sears, Roebuck and Company, but as those avenues of merchandising opened up and as advertising proliferated, understanding and acceptance of consumer culture and its pitfalls increased.¹⁰⁰ For their part, the horticultural industry may have recognized the implications of their broadened customer base, and no longer presumed that personal ties or a shared passion for trees and flowers could solve industry dilemmas. Whatever the reasons for their decline, the complaints and conundrums so typical of the mid-nineteenth-century horticultural trade are eloquent reminders that America’s emerging consumer culture came with a price tag. In 1854, the *Prairie Farmer* emphasized the toll on customers, but as the decades unfolded and business boomed, America’s horticultural industry also paid a price for its own success.

⁹⁸ See Charles Van Ravenswaay, *A Nineteenth-Century Garden* (New York, 1977), 18. By the early twentieth century, Ellwanger and Barry advertised that they hired no agents, but sold plants only through their catalogs. See Ellwanger and Barry Advertisement, *House Beautiful* 23 (Apr. 1908): 44.

⁹⁹ See Buck Downs, ed., *Directory of National Trade and Professional Associations of the United States* (Washington, D.C., 2002), 108. Today, the association is known as the American Nursery and Landscape Association.

¹⁰⁰ Montgomery Ward began catalog sales in 1872, and Sears offered serious competition in the 1890s. See David B. Danbom, *Born in the County: A History of Rural America* (Baltimore, 1995), 149.