

THE CUTTING EDGE

No Flower Shall Wither;
OR,
Horticulture in the Kingdom of the Frogs

by Gary K. Clabaugh

In olden times, when hope still mattered, a little boy named Horace was in love with flowers. When they bloomed, Horace was very, very happy; and when they withered, he was very, very sad.

Now Horace was a small frog, living in the Kingdom of the Frogs. In this realm, Bullfrogs reigned supreme because of their ability to croak very loudly and remain hidden for long periods in the muck at the bottom of ponds.

Happily for Horace, Bullfrogs professed a great love of flowers. In fact, the Kingdom's residents were compelled to pay tribute to support community greenhouses where small frogs sent their seedlings. Bullfrogs preferred private greenhouses for their own seedlings.

One fine day the Bullfrogs began harrumphing that the state-run greenhouses were in an awful mess. In *A Kingdom at Risk*, a blue-ribbon Bullfrog panel even proclaimed, "If an enemy dominion were in charge of our greenhouses, their condition would be a cause for war." Bullfrogs were fond of finding causes for wars.

Few stopped to consider that public greenhouses operated under Bullfrog rules and that Bullfrogs determined their resources. Fewer still seemed to notice that public greenhouse conditions mirrored public conditions in the Kingdom (bad neighborhoods, bad greenhouses; better neighborhoods, better greenhouses).

When Horace came of age and it was time to make his way in the world, he thought and thought about what to do. "I know!" exclaimed Horace with a smile, "I shall become a licensed horticulturalist"—certification being necessary for state greenhouse employment—"and bring flowers to bloom."

In the Kingdom of the Frogs, learning vital things—such as how to remove Bullfrog bunions or assist Bullfrog tax avoidance—required lengthy and focused schooling. Horticultural training was far easier.

Colleges, largely controlled by Bullfrog trustees, saw horticultural programs as a source of ready revenue and little more. Bullfrogs even set up easier “alternative routes” to certification—“Grow for the Kingdom,” for example—just in case traditional routes were too tough. “Such alternatives,” Bullfrogs earnestly croaked, “open careers in horticulture to bright people who are enthusiastic about plant growth.”

Horace wondered, “Why is it so easy to become a horticulturalist when other important things are hard?” Nonetheless, he took the standard training and learned as much as he could. Meanwhile, the Bullfrogs continued to stoke dissatisfaction regarding public greenhouses.

When Horace graduated he found a position in a public greenhouse in one of the poorer neighborhoods of the Kingdom. There were many such neighborhoods. Horace quickly discovered that he and his fellow horticulturalists had little say about how the communal greenhouse was run. Horace was not permitted to whitewash the greenhouse glass, so his sun-sensitive plants soon were scalded. He had no control over the greenhouse heat; so his cool-weather plants soon were cooked. Greenhouse managers even decided what type of fertilizer he should use.

If leggy seedlings needed pinching back, Horace wasn’t permitted to do it. Seedling owners had to be consulted, and then greenhouse management made the final decision. Horace was not even permitted to apply insecticide or pull a weed. Only administrators, who in turn were controlled by a greenhouse board operating under strict Bullfrog rules, could make such decisions.

Horace would fill in the requisite pink slips requesting spraying or weeding, but nothing came of them. In consequence, Horace’s plants soon were sucked dry by white flies, mealy bugs, and aphids, while weeds stole their nourishment.

It wasn’t clear to Horace why the greenhouse was run that way. Some said Bullfrog mandates left the manager little choice. Others blamed it on the manager’s desire to be a Bullfrog. Still others thought it was because greenhouse board members had no horticultural training and knew little about growing flowers.

In this Kingdom it was customary for agronomical ignoramuses to control horticultural affairs. Even the Bullfrog Secretary of Horticulture had no knowledge of plant husbandry—though he was well connected at the pond. In lieu of knowledge he substituted croaky solemnity. He regularly admonished greenhouse managers, for instance, to “demand higher expectations at all levels.” In self-defense, greenhouse managers afterward declared that when plants didn’t thrive, it was some horticulturalist’s fault.

Meanwhile Horace was realizing how important it was that he had no control over how plants were sprouted and first raised as seedlings. By the time plant owners brought them to the greenhouse, their all-important

early growth period was over. Horace would get seedlings that were leggy from insufficient sun, stunted from inadequate fertilizer, or wilted from too little water, and often it was too late for him to undo the damage.

Old-timers told Horace that there was a time when struggling seedlings were put into a smaller greenhouse and given special care. But Bullfrogs declared that as many plants as possible should be put in the main greenhouse. Thus Horace received seedlings requiring more care than he could give.

Horace and his co-workers also controlled their seedlings only part of the day, five days a week, 180 days of the year. The rest of the time, and that was a great deal of time indeed, seedlings were “cared for” by their owners. That gave them ample opportunity to undo whatever Horace did.

It wasn't that the seedling owners were all indifferent. Many cared about their plants, but they were too besieged or uninformed to care properly. You see, small frogs were underpaid, often out of work, and sometimes homeless. Many were sick, and without health care. All that was because only Bullfrogs mattered in the Kingdom of the Frogs.

No matter what shape seedlings were in when he got them, Horace tried his best to make them thrive. In the end, though, the damaged condition of many new seedlings, inane greenhouse rules, incessant hectoring of Bullfrog officials, and seeing his work undone by plant owners combined to grind Horace down.

About this time the Frog King emerged from the muck on the bottom of his pond, swam to the surface, stuck his thick Bullfrog head out of the water, and croaked a royal decree. “Henceforth,” he thrummed mightily, “no flower shall wither!” And with that he dove back into the muck.

Little additional money followed for public greenhouses, but new mandates did. Bullfrog officials declared, for instance, that all public greenhouses must measure and report plant development. “Henceforth,” the Bullfrogs croaked, “public greenhouse plant growth must be assessed, the results proclaimed, and horticulturalists held accountable.” (There was no mention of measuring plant growth in the private greenhouses that served the Bullfrog's seedlings.)

Accountable Horace struggled mightily, but the neglected seedlings given him proved his undoing. He just couldn't get them all to measure up. Soon Horace was under the greenhouse manager's baleful stare. Sternly he said to Horace, “Too many of your plants are not meeting standards.” Horace started to explain, “But there is so much I don't contro—” “Ah, ah, ah!” the manager interrupted. “I had hoped you wouldn't offer excuses! Truly professional growers just admit they must do a better job.”

Horace wasn't the only horticulturalist whose damaged plants often failed to thrive. So many plants were stunted that the Bullfrogs threatened to label the greenhouse “dangerously substandard.” “If that happens,” the

greenhouse administrator warned, "I'm not going down alone!" Then he began drawing up the Bullfrog-mandated Seedling Safety Plan.

Plant owners began thinking about transferring their seedlings to other greenhouses. Bullfrogs assured them it was every plant owner's right. Practically, though, their choices were limited to the same poor neighborhood. Oddly, the Bullfrogs knew that would happen, though they never said so.

Soon Bullfrog corporations began taking over communal greenhouses, operating them for profit. Just as many seedlings withered as before, but the Bullfrogs were much more contented.

The greenhouse season came to an end and there was sadness in Horace's eyes that had never been there before. He was unsure into what realm he was withdrawing. He also wondered what made him weary before his life had truly begun. Yes, Horace still loved flowers. Only now, when he saw a blossom, he found it difficult not to think of all the seedlings that had no real chance to bloom.

It was then that Horace's "miracle plant" came into flower. When Horace had received this seedling, it was in sad, sad shape. But it evidenced an uncanny resilience, responding eagerly to Horace's tender care. Yes, every time the plant went home, it came back worse for wear. But Horace would nurse it back to health, and the plant gained even more vigor.

When Horace's "miracle plant" finally came into bloom, it was a wonderful thing! Covered with fleshy pink blossoms that had blood-red interiors, it revealed a beauty that took Horace's breath away. "I've never seen anything so magnificent!" Horace said, as his weariness fled and the sadness left his eyes.

Horace spent the vacation recovering and considering his future. Eventually, because of that one glorious plant, he decided to return to the greenhouse for a second year. When he did, Horace found that things were worse than ever. Thanks largely to Bullfrog mandates, love of flowers was either an afterthought, or not thought of at all. The focus was on growth charts and standards instead.

Horace still was determined to once again do his very best. "Few worthwhile things are easy," he thought. But beneath that surface hopefulness, his sadness and weariness already were reemerging.

THE END

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