

GROWING KNOWLEDGE

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NICH leaders and advisors met at the Denver Botanic Gardens in June 2016 for the 2nd NICH strategic planning retreat.

From left to right, back row: Cyndi Haynes (Iowa State University), Shannon Spurlock (Denver Urban Gardens), Lucy Bradley (NC State University), Susan Mahr (University of Wisconsin), Tom Underwood (American Horticultural Society), Casey Sclar (American Public Gardens Association).

Front row: Rusty Collins (Colorado State University), Ellen Bauske (University of Georgia), Jessica Romer (Denver Urban Gardens), Dave Close (Virginia Tech), Tom Bewick (USDA-NIFA), Gail Langellotto (Oregon State University) and Suzi McCoy (Garden Media Group).

Helping horticulture find its niche

BY GAIL LANGELLOTTO, D. CASEY SCLAR, ELLEN BAUSKE, TOM UNDERWOOD, SUSAN MCCOY & TOM BEWICK

THE NATIONAL INITIATIVE for Consumer Horticulture (NICH; pronounced “nitch”) is a movement whose intention is to provide a unified voice to promote the benefits and value of horticulture to policy makers, decision makers and the general public. NICH brings together academic sectors, government, private industry and nonprofits with an interest in consumer horticulture.

NICH’s mission is to “grow a healthy world through plants, gardens and landscapes.” In short, NICH seeks to cultivate a passion and appreciation for plants, while increasing a universal demand for gardening.

NICH aims to echo and capitalize on the

success of the Specialty Crop Farm Bill Alliance. This alliance — a national coalition of more than 120 organizations representing growers of fresh fruits and vegetables, dried fruit, tree nuts, nursery plants and other products — was organized in advance of the 2007 Farm Bill to ensure that Congress heard the message, loud and clear, that specialty crops were important and that federal funds were needed for research and extension in specialty crops.

Representation came from across the specialty crop sector and included United Fresh Produce Association, AmericanHort, U.S. Apple Association and many others. As a result of the alliance’s efforts, the 2007 Farm Bill allotted >>

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\$230 million (later raised to \$320 million) for specialty crops.


The alliance continues to have a huge impact on the production of commodities such as fruits, vegetables, tree nuts, nursery crops and floriculture. While the alliance benefits horticulture production, NICH represents the end-use side of hor-

ticulture, ultimately serving the general public (consumers).

Since its inception, NICH has aligned dozens of organizations, crafted a mission and vision statement, and developed a working set of core values, goals and associated objectives. NICH's vision is to "use stakeholder partnerships to increase the

percentage of U.S. households participating in consumer horticulture to 90 percent by 2025." Three goals were crafted to address the potential benefits consumer horticulture will have on community, economic and environmental systems. Specific objectives were also developed to guide work on each goal (Table 1).

Table 1. NICH goals and initial associated objectives. Note that these goals are all rooted in sustainability traits for easy linkage to other existing guidelines.

NICH GOALS		
Community Goal	Economic Goal	Environmental Goal
Cultivate healthy, connected and engaged communities	Recognize consumer horticulture as a driver of the agricultural economy	Consumer horticulture restores, protects and conserves natural resources through research and education
		
NICH OBJECTIVES		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educate the public on nutritional, physical, psychological and social benefits associated with consumer horticulture. • Provide policy makers with current scientific information that supports the social, health, economic and ecological impacts of consumer horticulture. • Strengthen the adoption of consumer horticulture as an effective tool for improving human health and well-being. • Motivate a diverse U.S. population to adopt consumer horticulture as a means to address culturally relevant needs and increase community participation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Document, comprehensively measure, and disseminate the economic impact and benefits of consumer horticulture. • Create a united and recognized voice by building partnerships among all sectors that contribute to consumer horticulture. • Train our existing and future workforce to be more professional, knowledgeable, skilled and safe. • Help retail operations and consumer service providers succeed, and increase their profitability through the development of better economic management tools and technologies. • Stimulate entrepreneurial opportunities in consumer horticulture. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicate the environmental benefits of consumer horticulture. • Develop and promote sustainable practices specific to consumer horticulture. • Educate practitioners on appropriate use of production and management inputs. • Identify and implement the positive environmental impacts of consumer horticulture on water quantity and quality resources. • Identify and develop plants, products and technology appropriate to the diversity of landscape and gardening practices to enhance ecosystem services. • Forge a collective strategy with sectors of consumer horticulture to proactively address important issues such as the importation, introduction and spread of invasive species.

Our organizational structure (Table 2) allows us to recruit nationally known leaders including researchers, extension agents, master gardeners, nonprofit directors, growers, retailers and industry providers. Three goal committees (Community, Economic and Environmental) interact with three advisory councils representing different consumer horticulture sectors. The goal committees prioritize and plan work to fulfill the initiative's mission.

The councils (Land Grant, Commercial and Non-Profit) each provide industry- and sector-specific input and guidance. The Executive Committee manages the general business of the organization and ensures equality and open communication to all stakeholders, supported by marketing expertise.

Tom Bewick from the USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture serves as an external advisor.

How will NICH benefit the retail garden and nursery industry?

NICH aims to grow a culture where plants are considered a necessity rather than a luxury. Envision a society where people of all ages garden or engage with plants for their well-being every day of the year. More gardeners and consumers of garden-related goods and services will mean an increased demand and sales for plants and related products.

By developing a cohesive voice, NICH will position consumer horticulture to be more successful in leveraging public funding from USDA's Specialty Crop Research Initiative and other sources, thereby growing the entire industry. NICH will conduct comprehensive industry-wide research; implement prioritized research objectives; document economic impacts; and articulate the social and environmental benefits of consumer horticulture.

NICH seeks to build a strong case for continued support that will benefit university research and extension personnel, as well as school gardens and community green spaces.

Ultimately, NICH aims to raise the profile of consumer horticulture and >>



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Table 2. NICH organizational structure.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE	
Chair: Casey Sclar, Executive Director, American Public Gardens Association	
Co-Chairs: Ellen Bauske, University of Georgia Center for Urban Agriculture; Tom Underwood, Executive Director, American Horticultural Society	
Secretary/Treasurer: Gail Langelotto, Associate Professor, Oregon State University	
Marketing: Suzi McCoy, president, Garden Media Group	
NICH COMMITTEE CHAIRS	NICH COUNCIL CHAIRS AND CO-CHAIRS
Community Goal Community: Pam Bennett, Chair of the Extension Master Gardener National Committee	Land Grant Council: Rick Durham, Extension Professor, University of Kentucky; Margaret Pooler, Research Geneticist, US National Arboretum
Economic Goal Committee: Debbie Hamrick, Director of Specialty Crops, North Carolina Farm Bureau Federation	Non-Profits Council: Shannon Spurlock, Director of Public Affairs and Policy, Denver Urban Gardens; Tom Underwood, Executive Director, American Horticultural Society
Environmental Goal Committee: Julie Weisenhorn, Associate Extension Professor, Department of Horticulture, University of Minnesota	Commercial Council: Clint Albin, President, Clint Albin Consulting
INDEPENDENT ADVISOR	
USDA Liaison: Tom Bewick, National Program Leader, USDA-NIFA	

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esteem for those who work in the trade including landscapers, growers and suppliers to the industry.

Involvement

There are many ways, big and small, that members of the nursery industry can become involved with NICH.

First and foremost is to join the organization. If you are unable to commit to more active efforts, you could be involved by monitoring future growth and successes via the listerv (sign up at goo.gl/2MH2tY), or you could recommend someone who should be involved in an industry grant review panel.

Other opportunities include helping spread the word about NICH, offering your expert advice, or getting involved with a group of like-minded passionate leaders with a committee or council that suits your time and talent. All have major impacts on the effort.

To join NICH or learn more about the initiative, visit www.ConsumerHort.org for more information. ☺

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D. Casey Sclar is executive director of the American Public Gardens Association. Contact him at csclar@publicgardens.org.

Ellen Bauske is a public service senior at the Center for Urban Agriculture, University of Georgia. Contact her at ebauske@uga.edu.

Tom Underwood is executive director of the American Horticultural Society. Contact him at tunderwood@ahs.org.

Susan McCoy is the owner of Garden Media Group. Contact her at susan@gardenmediagroup.com.

Tom Bewick is national program leader in the Division of Plant Systems-Production at the United States Department of Agriculture's National Institute of Food and Agriculture. Contact him at tbewick@nifa.usda.gov.



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