

RETIRED TTU PROFESSOR STILL TENDS TO HIS PLANTS

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Herald-Citizen Staff, Cookeville, Putnam Co., TN
Sunday, Apr 11, 2010

Photo: **Former Tennessee Tech professor Harold Funk** checks on the plants in one of his greenhouses at his home in Cookeville. Herald-Citizen Photo/Ty Kernea



COOKEVILLE -- Cookeville resident Harold Funk knows his way around a garden. He owns multiple greenhouses and gardens at his home and business on Harley Drive, has bachelor's and master's degrees in horticulture and taught at Tennessee Tech for about 40 years. However, he did not always enjoy rolling up his sleeves in the garden in West Virginia where he was born. "I hated the garden when I was little because it interfered with my running the neighborhood and all that. Back in those days the women took care of the garden. (My mother) saw opportunities for us in the garden, and if I could get out of it, I would

sneak off, go to the creek, stomping on snakes, and stuff like that," said Funk. "Now I just about live out there (in the garden)." Though he tried to avoid the garden when he was young, he certainly did not avoid hard work. By the age of eight he was helping his neighbor cut wood for a quarter a day. By the age of 10 he was handling his father's horse team on his own and spending much of the day unsupervised.

"When I was small, I was all over those hills. I'd be gone all afternoon or all day and then I'd come in for supper. I tried not to miss a meal, but if I missed it there (at home), everybody around me was relatives, so I ate anyplace I was at. They all knew me well. Sometimes (my family) didn't know where I was all day. I was free and went everywhere. I covered those hills. They didn't worry about us then. The neighbors wouldn't let anybody bother me. They knew me -- I stopped at all of them. I walked clear up to my grandfather's place and it was five miles of old country road." Funk was 16 when he left high school to work on the railroad. He attempted to join the Navy when he was 17, however because of his young age and his parents' refusal to sign a release form, he was declined. "I'm glad I didn't get in, because I was sea-sick every time I was on a ship. I get sea-sick in the back of a car," he joked.

When Funk was 18 he became a Marine and served for three years before being discharged. After that he married and went to work at a cement plant. Later he went back to school and earned both a B.S. and M.S. in horticulture. Not long after graduation, he came across a notice that Tennessee Polytechnic Institute was looking for a horticulture professor to start in January of 1953. He sent in his resume and was hired to teach a variety of topics ranging from flower arranging and landscape gardening to forestry. "We had fun," said Funk. "The students, they keep you young. They were always doing something, always playing tricks on me. And I worked them over too. We had a good time."

He remembers one particular field trip to Chuck Johnson's Nursery. A female student had gone into one of the greenhouses when Funk made the comment that the two inch pipes that led into the structure looked like they put out a lot of water. In a flash one of the male students reached over and turned on the sprinklers to the greenhouse. Funk still laughs at the memory of the female student running out, dripping wet, and yelling at the male student. "He jumped over a fence and ran," said Funk with a chuckle. "That girl about made a eunuch of him."

Funk taught from 1953 until his retirement in 1986, but also taught night classes and extension classes for 10 years after that. Even today, he has students stop him in stores to greet him and express how much they

enjoyed his classes all those years ago. "I never thought I'd be a teacher," he said. "That's the last thing I thought. My (high school) class didn't think I was going to amount to anything. But opportunity hit and I grabbed it."

Today Funk keeps himself busy with his home business of selling produce and flowers. Growing beans, tomatoes, corn, peppers, petunias, roses, impatiens, begonias, marigolds, geraniums and a variety of other plants leaves Funk with little free time. "Everybody ought to have a greenhouse. There wouldn't be any crime then; they wouldn't have time for it. We wouldn't even have to have a jail," said Funk.

He and his **wife, Sarah**, run their business themselves with help from their extended family and a Tennessee Tech horticulture student. Funk's large family includes five children, three step-children, 15 grandchildren, four step-grandchildren and 14 great-grandchildren and one on the way. Funk has a son who followed in his footsteps by becoming a landscaper and a daughter who became a teacher, but he is proud of all of his family's accomplishments, he says, and is glad they enjoy what they do. "If you do what you really like to do, you'll be better off, even though it might not pay as much. That's what I always told my students."

*See History – Putnam County, TN files at:
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