Estate, Glasshouse & Field Research Unit

G. Wood

1 999 was an exceptionally demanding yet produc-tive year for the Estate, Glasshouse & Field Research Unit. Almost 50% of the total usable land area was required for field trials. There is a trend towards increasing size of individual trials: two trials (one brassica, one cereal) alone accounted for more than 10 ha. The SCRI/SAC/BPC Potato Trials Open Day on 12 August 1999 was a tremendous success. This event is now an established feature in the technology transfer programme pertaining to potato research and advisory matters. In conjunction with the scientists involved with the trials, monitoring of the sites of previous GM experiments on SCRI land continued throughout the year. These trials included potato and strawberry releases in 1996, 1997, and 1998. An HSE Specialist Inspector also made an unannounced spot-check of all these sites and found no residual or groundkeeper potato or strawberry material. Such trials and the associated monitoring procedures, reports, and inspections, provide valuable data with regard to the risk assessments associated with GM crop field releases.



The large area occupied by tunnel structures was increased again, with several new polytunnels being erected for specialist use, and a number of existing tunnels were re-covered. A new irrigation system with automatic on/off control and pressure regulation was designed and installed throughout this area. Plant production in glasshouses, tunnels, and growth cabinets placed great demands on the limited space available. The situation was not helped by the ageing nature of some facilities and the difficulties in ensuring regular maintenance in others. Several cabinets were out of action for lengthy periods and others had inadequate light levels for the proposed research. Such problems placed extra burdens on the staff looking after plants within these facilities.

These were exacerbated by staff shortages over a large part of the year. The exceptional demands, however, were met due to the great commitment, ability, and co-operation of Unit staff, coupled with a more proactive involvement with clients. All the staff are to be applauded for their efforts. It was a considerable logistical achievement to meet all the clients' requirements.

The line managers in the Unit were very conscious of limitations in budget allocations and shortage of manpower. However, their careful management of resources was effective in ensuring that the priority quality standards were not compromised. Several line managers were responsible for the astute management of funds and contracts with clients, and income generated by the EGFR Unit direct to the Institute exceeded expectations.

Major components of the Countryside Premium Scheme, comprising the planting of nearly 1000 metres of new hedging and the installation of over 1500 metres of new rabbit fencing, were completed at the start of the year. Approximately 300 linear metres of dry-stone dyke restoration were completed at the end of the year, to improve several field boundaries.

A significant contribution was made to the specification, design, and planning of a new state-of-the-art research glasshouse complex. The application to establish this facility at SCRI was successful, and construction work commenced late in 1999. The complex was opened in June 2000 by Mr John Home Robertson, Deputy Minister for SERAD (see also page 48), and will come into full operation in the latter part of this year. During the year, Unit staff also made a significant contribution (factual and advisory) to the Institute's review of its Science Strategy. Consequentially, in the year 2000, representatives from this Unit will be major contributors to the groups looking at (a) plant growth facilities (field and protected/controlled environments), (b) seed potato production options, and (c) efficient and effective utilisation and operation of the new research glasshouse complex, in line with the requirements of the new science aims.

Research services



John McAllion MP, MSP, presents SVQ certificates to members of EGFR staff, November 1999.

The staff training and development programme continued successfully. The number of core staff pursuing SVQs increased from three to five. Two other staff undertook training in line management/supervisory/ team-leader skills. Another member of staff successfully completed her HND (in Horticulture) during the year. Four new staff appointments were made towards the end of the year. We welcomed Derek Matthew to the field trials staff from August, together with Marion Grassie, Alasdair Munro, and Graham Pitkin to the glasshouse staff from October. Barry Robertson left on 28 May 1999 after 24 years service to the Institute. He joined SHRI on 7 July 1975 when he started an Apprenticeship in conjunction with the Agricultural Training Board (now LANTRA). From apprentice to senior line manager in the Glasshouse Unit, he had been involved in and responsible for the production of countless millions of a vast array of different types of plant material spanning a multitude of research programmes. His contribution has had a highly significant impact on the success of the plant production systems in place at SCRI. Latterly, he had been involved increasingly in operational team and client interface management. He was also a major player in the introduction of sorely needed modern technologies with regard to auto-environment and auto-irrigation control systems in our glasshouses and with regard to auto-seed sowing equipment and seed germination processes. The skill, experience, knowledge and commitment Barry takes with him will be a great loss to SCRI. We wish him and his family good luck for their future in Norwich where Barry took up his new position as Glasshouse Manager at the John Innes Centre.