

2015 Young Horticulturist of the Year winning speech

Karl Noldan¹



Fig. 1 Karl Noldan (right) delivering his speech alongside other contestants at the 2015 Young Horticulturist of the Year Competition.

Karl was winner of the Best Speech Award for this speech presented at the grand final of the 2015 Young Horticulturist of the Year Competition. The grand final was held 11–12th November at the Auckland Botanic Gardens.

The topic for the speech was: *Environmental sustainability is a key focus for New Zealand's horticulture industry, and visionary organisations are increasingly creating new business models that have sustainability at their core. How do you believe your business or sector can most effectively embrace sustainability principles and practices in a manner that benefits the environment, customers and profitability?*

My son turns four today! He's already hooked on gardening – with me as a father he never really had a chance!

As you can imagine, we recently built a small glasshouse together for our lush tomato plantation and I was digging over the soil while he was watching carefully to spot the wriggling worms. By the end of the digging he had a squirming pile mounded on his little shovel and was happy to return them to the soil when I convinced him I was finished with my tools.

The greater his enjoyment of the worms and the garden the more he wants to be involved – he is connected and I believe this is the key to true environmental sustainability.

I Googled 'environmental sustainability' and found some interesting words used to describe the benefits:

- Cost savings
- Risk mitigation
- Tax incentives
- Keeping up with the competition
- It even opens up possibilities for new revenue opportunities.

These things sound like they benefit the profit margin, but have little to do with customers or the environment. There was little mention of possible social gains.

Now, it's pretty easy to criticise what other people are doing; I have had years of practice.

I think the key lies in the motivation. Your motivation for sustainability has to be sustainable too. We can't embrace sustainability just because it is fashionable to do so.

Richard Louv, author of *Last Child in the Woods* and *The Nature Principle*, and co-founder of the Children and Nature Network talks about sustainability in his books; he tells us that "To act, most of us need motivation beyond despair."

As I teach my son to enjoy nature his motivation to help increases and at the Wellington Botanic Garden we teach children with the attitude of love, not loss.

If we can convince them to fall in love with the plants, insects and fungi around them they will naturally want to look after them. My focus on sustainability is concerned with the present, but focused on the future of the industry.

It is not about filling people with new knowledge or teaching them botanical nomenclature – it is about inspiration and it is about engagement.



Fig. 2 Karl Noldan (right) receiving his Best Speech Award from Steve Sexton, Countdown (left).

We want to create connections so that people recognise the environment they are supposed to be protecting.

At one of the first school holiday activities I ran, there was one young boy who kept raving about dinosaurs and struggled to keep focused on our session. But when we told him about the possibility of cycads being around at the same time as dinosaurs, a light switched on – he had made a connection.

Fortunately, at the Wellington Botanic Garden I don't have to worry about making a financial profit, but my job is heavily focused on the environment and customers.

Public gardens can take a lead in education, but not the education as prescribed in classrooms from textbooks. Rather, we can immerse young hearts and minds in the gardens, letting them discover things in nature, giving them time to see for themselves. Leave them bamboo poles and punnets of plants; give them tools to play with.

I am passionate about working with Wellington Botanic Garden to help reverse the disconnection that exists between people and plants and making terms like 'environmental sustainability' have a relevant meaning.

If you want the next generation to be environmentally sustainable: **get out of the way and let them learn!**

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