FCI sat down with Debi Chedester, Executive Director of the American Floral Endowment (AFE), to talk about their 60th-anniversary celebration this year, and the important research and programmes they provide for the industry. We delve deeper into the industry solutions AFE has been funding, such as scientific research, internships, scholarships, education, and floral design grants.

T he American Floral Endowment (AFE) has stayed true to its values for the past 60 years. Its mission as a charity has been advancing the horticultural industry now and for generations to come.

For a non-native English speaker, the word ‘endowment’ is not an easy one to translate. The meaning might not immediately conjure up the correct image to explain the concerns of the AFE organisation. This ambiguity prompted us to kick off with a big question.

FCI: What is American Floral Endowment all about?
Debi Chedester: “The American Floral Endowment is an independent non-profit organisation that funds research, scholarships, internships, and grants in floriculture and horticulture for the benefit of the industry as a whole.

The word ‘endowment’ refers to the total of a non-profit institution’s investable assets, where the interest and dividend gains are used to fund vital research and programmes that align with the needs of the industry. For AFE, this word signifies our commitment to industry dollars growing together to create greater funding for programmes and resources that benefit our industry.”

What does the word floral in flower endowment precisely mean?
“Floral in the American Floral Endowment spans across the floriculture industry. It’s not just cut flowers, but bulbs, bedding, perennials, indoor flowers and foliage plants as well. Our research and programmes focus on all aspects of flowers and plants from breeding and genetics, production and post-production, pest and diseases, packaging and shipping, to best practices for care and handling of flowers and plants. Research on sustainability and climate change are also a focus of future research programmes. We look at the whole life span on these products and don’t just focus on one area.”

If AFE represents ornamental horticulture in the USA, what can you tell us about the value and size of the industry?
“According to the 2020 Floriculture Crops Summary released by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the wholesale value of floriculture crops is up nine per cent from 2019 valuations. Total crop value at wholesale for all growers with
$10,000 or more in sales is estimated at $4.80 billion for 2020, compared to $4.42 in 2019. The top five producing states are Florida (at 1.14 billion), followed by California, Michigan, New Jersey, and Ohio. Together, these states account for 65 per cent of the total production value in the U.S. In 2019, there were 20,655 floriculture growers in fifty states in the U.S."

Where does AFE come from, and has its ambitions and goals changed along the way?
“Originally starting as the foundation of the Society of American Florists, AFE separated to expand our reach beyond just the traditional floral side. Much of our research can be applied to flowers (cut and potted), potted foliage, perennials and bedding plants. Our goals of funding solutions to industry challenges haven’t changed much over the years, except to say that with ever-growing challenges we continue to expand and provide new resources and programmes to further assist the industry. An example of this is our new AFE Career Center which was launched last year. Labour is a major challenge, yet there wasn’t a place within the industry that connected jobseekers and employers. With AFE’s connections to all segments of the industry, along with our extensive work with faculty and students, it made sense to create a platform that could easily bridge the gap to introduce the industry to budding young professionals and help address the labour issues.”

Among your contributors is Asocolflores. Some narrow-minded folks may ask themselves why Colombian growers should fund research projects in the USA. Can you explain why cross-border participation in AFE is so important?
“When our name says American, much of the research we support can be used in other countries. All industry members struggle with the same challenges of tackling pests and diseases, utilising advances in technology, and other production issues. The research AFE funds, and the results of this research can be used globally. Asocolflores has been a major supporter of our work, and most recently the Thrips and Botrytis research being conducted. Only through industry support can we aggressively address these challenges. AFE research reports are available for free for use by the entire industry regardless of location. Our currently funded projects focus on industry practices leading to increased efficiency, reduced labour, improved crop quality, and increased profits.”

One of the most significant sustainability concerns for charities is steady income. Does this also apply to AFE?
“It certainly does. Donations and contributions make things happen. Without the past support from donors, we couldn’t be doing what we do today. AFE is always looking to engage new industry members while maintaining support of current donors to increase our sustainability and to further raise awareness for our industry programmes. Our annual fundraising event has been postponed for the past two years due to COVID-19. Instead, we’ve had to be creative in conducting virtual events to garner support. Currently, we are holding our Annual Fundraising Dinner virtually for the second year in a row. From now until Friday, August 13th, 2021, our entire Board of Trustees along with staff and other ambassadors are competing in a campaign named 60 Days to Raise $60,000 in honour of our 60th Anniversary. Even throughout the pandemic, AFE’s Trustees remained committed to funding research, providing vital resources, opportunities, and programmes at 100 per cent when the industry needed additional stability the most.”

How do you convince industry professionals that it is vital to support charities such as AFE?
“An industry is only as strong as those that support it. It is vital to support..."
AFE because without this critical research, the support of education through grants, and the support of young professionals with internships and scholarships—there wouldn’t be advances. No other organisation in the industry provides all of these services, and AFE support is necessary for the continued growth of the industry. If we don’t support university research, it will go away. If we don’t support young professionals with scholarships and internship opportunities, they’ll choose another field. AFE provides programmes that the industry needs to continue to grow and adapt.

What do you think are the most pressing issues in US floral that deserve funding?

“Right now, the significant issues are transportation, labour, and the supply chain. There are some things that unfortunately just can’t be fixed with research money from the supply chain. There are some things that are transportation, labour, and the supply chain. There are some things that are transportation, labour, and the supply chain. There are some things that are transportation, labour, and the supply chain.

AFE yearly has approximately one million dollars available for research funding. Who decides on which research and scholarships proposals receive funding? AFE accepts new research proposals annually, which are reviewed by its Research Committee, which consists of industry experts across all segments. As a general guideline, AFE’s primary research priorities are listed below. They are focused on all floricultural crops—fresh-cut flowers, fresh-cut greens, flowering potted plants, foliage plants, perennials, and bedding plants.

- Botrytis Control and Management
- Thrips Control and Management
- Bio-Control of Pests
- Post-Harvest Technology
- Production Technology
- Advanced Breeding Technology, including CRISPR
- Longterm Storage and Shipping Conditions for Cut Flowers, Bedding and Potted Plants
- Automation and Technology Leading to Labour Savings
- Sustainable Production and Handling Practices
- Reduce the Impact of Climate Change on Production, Handling, and Product Quality

This list is reviewed each year, and AFE’s Research Coordinator, Dr. Terri Nell, regularly speaks to industry members to collect feedback on new challenges and research focuses. Based on the feedback AFE receives, it solicits proposal to address these challenges. Submissions are also reviewed by industry members, and are then peer-reviewed to ensure that the projects AFE funds are solid in both mechanics and desired outcomes.

According to the 2020 Floriculture Crops Summary released by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the wholesale value of floriculture crops is up nine per cent from 2019 valuations.

AFE. These are larger, ongoing challenges made worse by the pandemic. For AFE, we remain focused on our mission of funding solutions through research, supporting industry education, and fostering the next generation.

One of the ideas behind AFE is to alleviate a potential constraint on the horticultural sector’s growth in the future by investing in education. How urgent is the problem, and how to resolve it?

“It’s urgent. The numbers of students entering the industry is not what it used to be. There’s a shortage of workers in all segments of the industry, and it’s a priority. Not only that, but as an industry, we need to work hard to change the perception of the available careers in the industry. There are so many other great career opportunities to explore, beyond the traditional production, wholesale and retail areas. Careers in communication/marketing, web design, and all business areas are also key to the success of our businesses.

This shortage presents a challenge to recruit young professionals, but there are many efforts underway—not just through AFE, but by programmes such as Seed Your Future which AFE also supports. No one industry organisation can tackle this alone. It must be a collaborative effort of everyone to promote the many and varied career opportunities available. AFE helps by investing in both hands-on internships to put classroom knowledge to use and providing annual scholarships to help recruit talent and with any financial boundaries. Additionally, our internships give young professionals direct experience and connections in the industry—building resumes and providing for future success. By preparing future generations to join our community, we are increasing the workforce, which is vital to the ongoing success of our industry.”

Tell us about AFE’s young professional council and how to take the business internship to the next level and about the collaboration with universities at home and abroad?

“Our Young Professionals Council offers leadership and networking opportunities for young industry professionals through events, webinars, and volunteer opportunities. This group is free to join and welcomes any young person (under 35) looking to build relationships in the industry and support AFE’s mission.

AFE’s collaboration with universities have deepened our connection with young professionals interested in our industry. Through connections with universities, we can reach faculty and students in the field. Our community of faculty members help promote our programmes, applications, and research. They also are invited to participate on a volunteer-basis to determine the best recipients for our scholarships and other awards.

We haven’t expanded these internationally at this point, but if other organisations have similar programmes where we can collaborate, we’d certainly be open to exploring that.”

What is the biggest future challenge for AFE?

“Increasing annual contributions to expand funding for more research and programmes is our biggest challenge. The number of industry businesses continues to decline and that means the potential for fewer donations. The work we do is vital to the growth of the industry, and we need more support in order to tackle more challenges.”