

Horticulture is Weird — Plantology is Cool!

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How are you connecting to younger generations through your business? Join the Seed Your Future movement, and inspire young people to consider a career in horticulture.

BY SUSAN E. YODER

What's in a name? According to middle school students, everything. Recent research to uncover the roots of why we have a lack of qualified candidates in the greenhouse industry and across all of horticulture led to some distressing truths — yet encouraging findings. But, are we up for making the adjustments necessary to attract more talented young people to careers in the plant world?

Consider for a moment what will happen if we do nothing. Study after study shows that getting kids and families to notice the plants around them, let alone appreciate the natural world and consider careers with plants, is daunting. Increased time engaging only with artificial environments, misconceptions about the quality of life afforded by jobs in horticulture, and lack of awareness of what horticulture and horticulture expertise means to the future of our planet are all steep hills for us to climb.

However, if we don't teach young people about plants, they won't grow up to have an appreciation for our world. They won't understand that we need horticulturists to feed the world with food that is safe and nutritious; to preserve native habitats; to imagine landscapes and bring

them to life; to tend to landscapes that welcome us home and invite us outdoors to play; to soothe and delight with flowers and foliage; to wonder and experiment; and to ensure the future of our planet. ***So, what can we do about it?***

SEED YOUR FUTURE IS PLANTED

In 2013, at a meeting of the American Society for Horticultural Science, horticulture professionals were asking just that question. They recognized that shrinking college or university horticulture programs, decline in qualified applicants for open positions across the industry and public apathy about plants were all contributing to a workforce shortage that left unchecked, would soon lead to a crisis. At that meeting, the Seed Your Future movement was formed to tackle this issue. Founded by Longwood Gardens and the American Society for Horticultural Science, the movement has quickly grown to more than 150 partners including horticulture companies, colleges and universities, gardening movements, and other affiliated organizations.

Founded on a desire for solid research, Seed Your Future conducted three phases of research to help discover why the perception of horticulture is low and why young people are not pursuing careers in the industry. Thanks to significant funding from Longwood Gardens and Ball Horticultural Company, and more than 20 other partners, our first phase of research studied the industry and confirmed that across the industry, lack of enough qualified applicants for open positions is a critical issue.

According to 2014 statistics, only 61 percent of the expected 57,900 average annual openings available in the horticulture industry are likely to be filled. Why, when the current U.S unemployment rate is 4.7 percent, and an estimated 58 percent of graduating college seniors cannot find jobs in their chosen field, and horticulture jobs plentiful; aren't people flocking to pursue careers working with plants?

We then studied Americans' perceptions of horticulture and careers working with plants. While "plant blindness" (the inability to see or notice the plants in one's own environment, leading to the inability to recognize the importance of plants in the biosphere and in human affairs) is rampant, the good news is there are many plant-based movements that are growing. Farm-to-table, field-to-vase, school and community gardens, and increased interest in home gardening are all contributing to a renewal of plant appreciation.

What is evident however is that most Americans have a narrow view of the careers available in the horticulture industry. In fact, our research found a prevalent stereotype that the only jobs in horticulture were in "lawn maintenance." There was little understanding of the growing, breeding, distribution, science, technology, art, design and business careers just waiting for qualified applicants.

FOCUS ON THE TWEENAGER

Knowing that middle school is a key time when students begin

to think about future careers, we conducted focus groups with middle schoolers, parents, teachers and guidance counselors, and the results were encouraging. Few understood the jobs available in the industry. But once participants learned about the diverse

opportunities across the industry, they were very interested. And significantly, not one middle schooler had ever heard the term "horticulture." They told us that we need to use simple language they can understand, and inspiring, relatable imagery.

So, what is in a name? Middle schoolers told us that "horticulture" is a "weird" word. After sharing the diversity of careers available, we asked them to give us words and phrases that might interest them to find out more about the field. Youth told us that terms such as



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“plantologist,” “plant specialist,” “exterior designer,” “plant artist” and “plant scientist” (to name just a few of the dozens suggested) are more “cool” — and would tempt them to find out more.

Other promising findings — youth want jobs where they can “make an impact on the world,” “be creative” and “save the environment.” What better to fuel their interests than jobs in horticulture? So, while there are plant-based movements making impact, what we haven’t done is connect those movements to career paths. We’ve not told the stories well, we’ve not inspired the next generation and their families.

INSPIRING THE NEXT GENERATION

The time to change those perceptions and inspire the next generation is now and Seed Your Future along with our partners, including Scholastic, is launching



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a proactive education, marketing and national PR campaign beginning this March.

We will collect and distribute short videos that appeal to youth and demonstrate the people and cool jobs in the industry. We will have a national PR campaign. We'll have sample lesson plans and guides for teachers and youth program leaders to incorporate plant career concepts into existing curriculum. For parents and youth, we'll have a digital platform of easily accessible resources and materials spotlighting careers in horticulture.

Most importantly, we are not creating all these materials ourselves. We know that there are already some impressive programs out there across segments of the industry. We'll help promote them. We hope to be a clearinghouse and to create only where gaps exist. Find out the details at: www.seedyourfuture.org/sites/default/files/SYF_Strategic_Plan_2017-2019.pdf.

JOIN THE MOVEMENT

So what additional adjustments does the industry need to do to attract more young people? Take a look at the jobs you offer. Are you connecting those jobs to the desire for impact young people tell us they want? How do you incorporate every position into the mission of your organization? How are you telling your stories? Do you inspire with short videos? How are you using social media? If you're not, you're likely not reaching the next generation at all. How are you describing the benefits of your positions? Pay is only one part of the package — what else do you offer to inspire your employees? Start by asking yourself, "Why do I do what I do?" Then, tell that story — and tell it well. Tell people ... #ILoveMyPlantJob.

And, while job titles might seem insignificant to you, they are everything to youth. Challenge your team to be creative. "Greenhouse Worker" might not resonate in the way that "Plant

Curator" will. Ask young people. Believe us, they will tell you.

Join us in this movement. Help tell the stories of how the work we do is important to the planet, to the beauty of our world, to nourishing our bodies and souls.

To inspire young people to even think about learning more about our industry, we must talk about it in ways that resonate with them and their families. We want young people to be our #FutureGreenCollar workers.

So, be cool — not weird. You are a plantologist! [gpn](http://gpn.org)

Susan E. Yoder is executive director of Seed Your Future and can be reached at syoder@seedyourfuture.org.

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