

CULTIVATING *NEW CUSTOMERS* ... AND MAYBE EVEN EMPLOYEES



Finding new customers, as well as potential employees, is not as easy as it once was. The Collegiate Plant Initiative is hoping to change that.

BY VIRGINIA FRAZIER

The Collegiate Plant Initiative (CPI) is a nonprofit organization with a mission to create people who love plants and find the plants people love. Made up of undergraduate students without backgrounds in plant science or related majors, these student leaders love plants and are passionate about sharing this love with as many college students as possible. This perspective allows CPI to directly relate to some of the most important people in the horticulture industry — future affluent consumers and educated employees.

The Initiative was inspired by Plants, Gardening and You (PG&Y), an introductory gardening class taught by Dave Clark at the University of Florida. Hundreds of students from every major enroll in PG&Y each semester to learn more about the basics of plants and gardening. Topics range from plant domestication and propagation to plant biotechnology and orchids.

Students also take PG&Y because they receive a plant every week they attend lecture, meaning that they can have a dorm or apartment full of plants by the end of the semester. After taking PG&Y, several students fell in love with plants and decided to create CPI with Clark.

By having this close connection to PG&Y, CPI can collect data on student plant preferences and recruit student talent every semester, as well as stay up to date with the newest trends and attitudes toward plants.

GETTING THEIR ATTENTION

CPI's first goal, making people who love plants, is accomplished through events, regular social media postings and articles.

Plant Drops are CPI's most noteworthy events. At each of these events, we bring 1,000 plants to the center of university campuses to give away to students for free. While students are eagerly waiting for their new plant, we share information about caring for the plant and how students can become involved in the horticulture industry.

At every event, students can be seen intensely studying flyers, putting CPI stickers on their shirt and water bottles, or taking pictures and videos to share on their social media. To date,



The Collegiate Plant Initiative works to build a stronger connection between the industry and the next generation of consumers and employees.

CPI has conducted Plant Drops at the University of Florida, Penn State University and Texas A&M University with plans to visit many more in the upcoming year.

When we visited Texas A&M University, students were so excited about receiving free plants that we managed to give away all 1,000 plants in only four minutes! We believe the excitement demonstrated by students across the country directly relates to their love of plants, and we are helping them cultivate this energy into life-long hobbies and careers.

While Plant Drops are a wonderful way to gain student attention, maintaining a strong social media presence is one of the most effective ways an organization can keep them engaged. Consistently posting high-quality and relevant content reminds students of our mission and gives them a reason to think about horticulture on an everyday basis.

Daily CPI Facebook and Instagram posts include images of the plants people love and

college students interacting with plants in various ways. Plant images expose these young adults to flowers and foliage they have never seen before and show them that they have a wide variety of choices available to them as a consumer.

Additionally, they see young adults just like themselves enjoying plants, which can help students realize that they are capable of taking care of plants and that plants have a place in their busy lives. Posts show that gardening can be a social event where students can meet others and develop friendships over the shared love of plants.

As CPI has grown and expanded over the past year, we have continued to work on outreach by writing articles, media releases and event announcements to spread our love of plants with others.

CPI's first targets are leaders and professionals in the industry — you and your colleagues. We want to provide insight into the minds of college students and how those insights directly



From Plant Drops and activity on social media to data findings and collaborative efforts, the CPI is always working to reach more college students across the nation.

apply to your business. We are also reaching the general student population by having a team of student writers researching and publishing stories based on topics created by other students. PG&Y students are polled every semester on what they would like to know about plants and then those ideas are narrowed into a set of stories available to writing staff. We also want to know what industry professionals think college students are interested in, since it could provide insight into the divide between industry and students.

FINDING THE PLANTS PEOPLE LOVE

Our second goal is to find the plants people love. So, what exactly does that mean?

It means that we aim to find out which plants are most popular among college students. From color, usage and overall appearance, we want to know what our students react to most. Are houseplants really the next big thing? Do students prefer annuals or perennials? Is there a color that grabs their attention the most? Through PG&Y, we are able to ask our students these exact questions and collect data on their preferences.

Five plants are displayed in front of the classroom during each lecture, and students are asked to write the number associated with their favorite plant on their attendance card. This simple method has led to an average student participation level of 92 percent in fall 2017 and 93 percent in spring 2018, despite responses being completely voluntary.

Since hundreds of students are enrolled each semester and a high percentage of students participate, a significant amount of data can be collected from various populations. This

Continuous innovation for garden mum combinations

The Beverly™ Family is perfect for combos. Consistent habit, vigor, and timing make this family a perfect fit for fall!

Easily fills large pots and profitable upgraded containers.

Perfectly timed for the peak of fall retail sales.

Non-fading colors last longer, giving consumers the best value in the most popular fall color mix.

For more information and availability: 855-630-3139
Contact your preferred sales representative or broker partner today. • www.syngentaflowers-us.com



Photos are either the property of Syngenta or used under agreement. ©2018 Syngenta. Some or all of the varieties listed herein may be protected under one or more of the following: Plant Variety Protection, United States Plant Patents, Utility Patents, and / or Plant Breeders Rights and may not be propagated or reproduced without authorization. The Alliance Frame, the Purpose Icon and the Syngenta logo are trademarks of a Syngenta Group Company. The trademarks displayed or otherwise used herein are trademarks of a Syngenta Group Company or third party.

data is then entered into an Excel spreadsheet, where responses can be sorted by class section, sex, college and class year. With 21 replicated experiments and 11 additional experiments completed to date, CPI is beginning to develop a predictive model to determine what a given student will choose when presented with a selection of plants.

In future semesters, we plan on asking additional questions about each student's demographic background, experience with plants and past purchasing patterns. These data points will allow for even more detailed information for use in areas like marketing and breeding that will allow companies to adapt to the next generation of consumers. Not only will this information be useful for the horticulture industry — it's good for students and young adults too!

With more companies using this information, consumers will have greater access to the plants that they actually enjoy and want to buy. We see this predictive model as a win-win for everyone who loves plants — and those that love to sell them.

GETTING GROWERS INVOLVED

What does the Collegiate Plant Initiative need from the industry? At every conference CPI

attends, there seems to be one statistic that is consistently used: 39 percent of jobs within the horticulture industry go unfilled each year. The need to reach students to fulfill these jobs across the supply chain is repeatedly stressed during these presentations, and CPI has fully accepted this challenge.

CPI currently has students who are interested in applying their knowledge and experience from various academic backgrounds to the horticulture industry. The only issue is there are not enough internships for them to apply to! Many companies mention that they have internships available, yet have job pages on their website consisting of general labor and truck drivers or internships that have not been updated in months or years.

This is where we need your help. If you are interested in hiring talented students to work or intern with your company, please reach out with information about your company and internship program. Consider taking time to reevaluate your current internship program, since internships are ultimately an investment in your company.

Companies with the greatest potential for attracting talent will have:

- A page on their website dedicated to jobs and internships available within the company

- An honest and thorough job description (honesty is appreciated and students want to know what they are signing up for)
- Clear application instructions
- Potential for career growth within the company (college students want more than a job — they want a career)
- Opportunities to connect with other interns/employees
- Compensation information readily available
- If you don't have all of these things, don't worry. Even taking small steps toward improving your internship program will go a long way in helping you attract the student talent you need for the future of your business.

The Collegiate Plant Initiative would not be able to accomplish these goals without the generous support of several organizations within the industry. Our partners include Altman Plants, the American Floral Endowment, the Fred C. Gloeckner Foundation, Proven Winners and the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences. ■

Virginia Frazier is the executive director of the Collegiate Plant Initiative. She can be reached at Virginia@collegiateplantinitiative.org. You can learn more about the Collegiate Plant Initiative at www.collegiateplantinitiative.org.

GREENHOUSE HEATING BOILERS

GAS • OIL • WOOD • BIOMASS

**MORE MODELS
CHOICES
SOLUTIONS**
hurstboiler.com



HURSTBOILER
100 Boilermaker Lane • Coolidge, GA 31738-0530
Tel: (229) 346-3545 • Fax: (229) 346-3874
email: info@hurstboiler.com