

CULTIVATING THE NEXT GENERATION OF Green Collar Professionals

Seed Your Future is on a mission "to promote horticulture and inspire people to pursue careers working with plants."

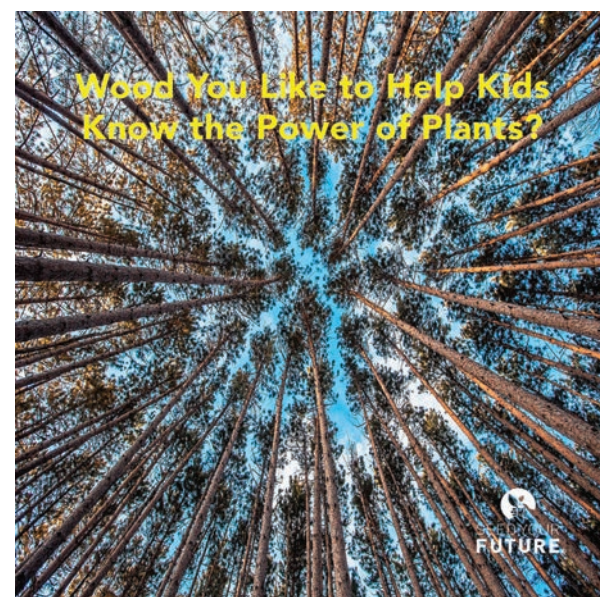
BY SUSAN E. YODER

We are reaching a defining moment in horticulture. The greenhouse growers, garden center owners and, in fact, most of the horticulturists of today are aging and retiring.

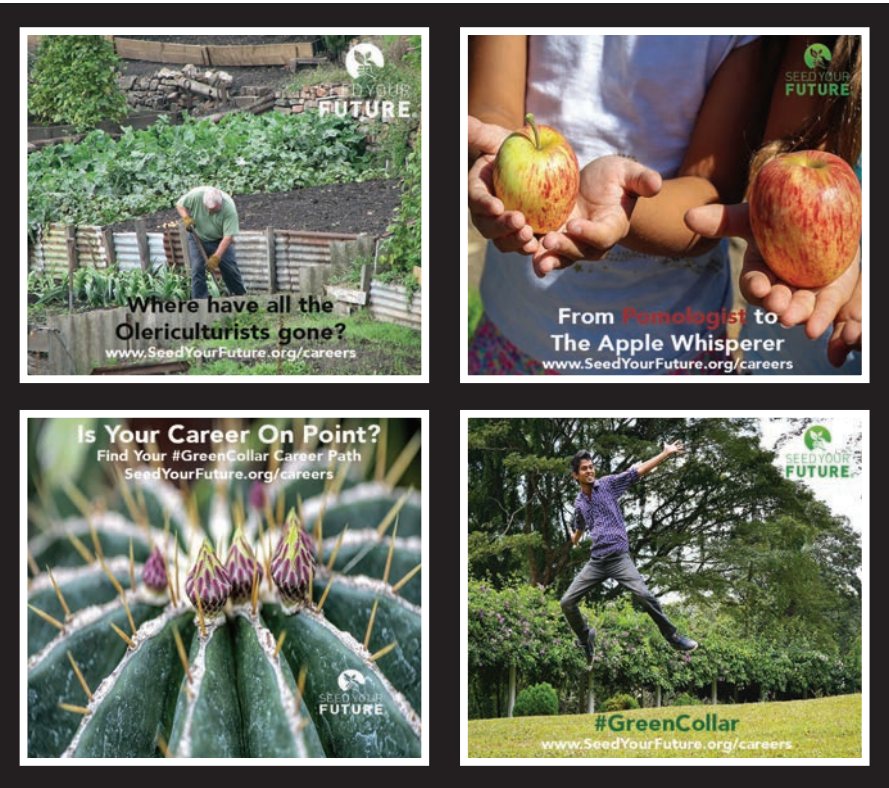
What should be a fountain of opportunity for others to step into their positions, finds us instead with a people-pipeline that is a mere dribble. Employers across all of horticulture cannot find enough qualified candidates to fill their open positions.

Certification programs, training programs, and college and university horticulture programs are not growing — and in many cases, are declining. This issue is not simply about the strength of our industry, it is about the future of the planet.

The crisis comes as we consider — who will take the reins and have the expertise to provide the technology, science, art and business acumen necessary to meet the rapidly increasing demand for ornamentals, fruits, vegetables, nuts and herbs in our world? Who will grow food that is safe and nutritious to feed the growing



Seed Your Future's mission is to promote horticulture and inspire young people to pursue careers working with plants in many different capacities.



population? Who will research cures for disease? Who will help solve some of our world's biggest environmental issues such as pollution, drought, pest infestation, clean water and climate change? And who will bring wonder to our world by creating landscapes and gardens

that are beautiful and provide physical, social and emotional health supports?

THE ANSWER IS YOU

It's you, and me, and other horticulture professionals, and educators, and plant-enthusiasts,

and frankly, everyone who already knows that the fate of our world lies in the next generation embracing the importance of plants not only to humans, but to animals, and to Earth. Our job is to show others the way. To cure the "plant apathy" that is raging, and to inspire people to join the ranks of the green-collar world are our collective marching orders — our "growing orders" as it were.

HELPING CREATE THE FUTURE

So, how do we do it? You're busy with your own company, workload, community and family. That's where collaboration and the Seed Your Future movement can help. "Planted" in 2014, Seed Your Future was formed by a partnership of horticulture companies, gardening organizations, schools, colleges and universities, public gardens and youth organizations who are united by the mission to promote horticulture and inspire more people to pursue careers working with plants.

We spent our first three years conducting focused research, which today serves as a foundation

for the work that officially launched in 2018. The research affirmed what we are experiencing today. We are living in a time of great disconnection with plants. Plants are everywhere — yet plants are nowhere on the minds of most Americans.

This "plant-blindness" is especially significant among our nation's youth. Informed by research examining the right time to reach young people about the wonder of plants and fulfilling plant careers, Seed Your Future decided to focus our first campaign on middle schoolers. But first, we needed to know what kids had to say.

The middle schoolers in our focus groups said they don't know what "horticulture" is. After sharing with them how plants impact our lives every day, and the diversity of careers across the art, science, technology and business of plants, kids were pretty clear. They want us to stop using "weird" words like "horticulture," show them through video and social media content how plants can change the world, and have "cool" young people tell them about their fun (#ILoveMyPlantJob)

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careers. They coined the term “plantologist” instead of “horticulturist” and urged us to connect plants to what they are already interested in such as sports, fashion, medicine, technology, art and more.

WINNING CAMPAIGNS

Seed Your Future's BLOOM! (www.WeAreBLOOM.org) campaign debuted in the spring of 2018 — and a second year of materials launched in the spring of 2019. Plans are under way now for the spring 2020 campaign as well. Through eye-catching content delivered both inside and outside the classroom, BLOOM! is educating and inspiring young people about the endless possibilities in horticulture.

An important partner in the movement is Scholastic. Scholastic has a presence in 100% of K-12 schools and over 90% of classrooms in the United States. With their support, we have also created an exciting microsite of free educator resources including an online learning module, sample lesson plans and activities, infographics and videos to help adults inspire youth to love plants and consider careers in horticulture. Anyone can download the free resources at www.Scholastic.com/BLOOM (educator resources) and www.WeAreBLOOM.org/partners (toolkit of materials).

We've already reached more than 4 million students, and virtually every middle-school

teacher in America. That's promising progress — but a very long “growing season.” You need employees now.

Now that the Seed Your Future movement is on a solid path of reaching middle schoolers, we're developing our second campaign market — this one focusing on older students. High schoolers, college-bound students, career-bound students, confused students, apathetic students, undeclared and unhappy students in other programs — they all are the potential market for the meaningful careers we offer. But, how do we cut through the clutter and show them the way to horticulture?

Seed Your Future is doing two things. First, we hosted a Summit in the summer of 2019 to explore promising practices in recruitment. Representatives from the industry and from education and training programs came together to share case studies and explore the best, most promising practices. In 2020, Seed Your Future will collaborate with others to provide a free toolkit and other resources to help education and training programs, and employers recruit those #FutureGreenCollar professionals.

Second, we're learning from other industries. The bottom line, quite honestly, it is good PR and promotion of our industry. Case in point, the meteoric rise in interest in becoming a professional chef — arguably one of the most difficult, competitive, time-intensive jobs, with little opportunity for life balance, let alone

connections outside the kitchen — can be directly attributed to their amazing PR, videos, TV shows and story-telling from celebrities and others.

We know that plant careers are rewarding, make a true difference in the world, are creative, inspirational and more. So, let's tell stories and become PR gurus. Let's learn from what kids told us, and embrace social media, create fun videos, and tell the inspirational stories of the horticulture heroes and plant champions in the world today (www.seedyourfuture.org/horticultureheroes).

That's what Seed Your Future is doing, and you can join in too. Use all the materials we create and curate from others who are doing terrific things in this area. Join the movement (www.SeedYourFuture.org — it's free) and access what we have so far. Even better — customize some resources for your own company, and share with your community.

Together, we can ensure that the next generation is raised with green thumbs, and knows how to get them dirty. I invite you to show them the way. It's time for everyone to wake up and see and grow the roses — and the trees — and the tomatoes. Together, we can show them how. ■

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