

# Taking the INITIATIVE

Even during a pandemic, the College Plant Initiative continues to grow new gardeners and industry professionals.

BY SAMANTHA BURRELL

**T**he Collegiate Plant Initiative (CPI) is an organization founded with the goal to make people who love plants, specifically focusing on college students. Throughout the American education system, plants are often overlooked fueling the phenomenon known as plant blindness, or the human tendency to ignore the plants around them. CPI attacks this phenomenon head on with its goal to expose students to the joy of plants and gardening.

CPI's roots come from the popular University of Florida class "Plants, Gardening, and You," taught by Dave Clark. Hundreds of students from all majors enroll in Clark's class each semester. In this class, students learn the basics of plant science, the fundamental skills to start their own gardens, and what the future of plants could look like through plant biotechnology. Students also test out their new skills on plants and seeds they receive throughout the semester, along with gardening supplies such as soil, pots, fertilizer and other gardening tools.

In 2017, students from this class teamed up with Clark to found CPI and bring this immersive experience to more college students to spark an interest in plants and combat plant blindness. From the very beginning, they reasoned that if the plant industry needed better contact with college students as a source of new industry talent, no one could do it better than college students themselves.

## CAPTURING OUR AUDIENCE

CPI started off addressing plant blindness with a spectacle that students could not ignore: hosting massive plant giveaway events known as "Plant Drops" on college campuses around the U.S. At each plant drop, CPI brings 1,000 plants to a popular spot on a college campus and gives them all away to college students for free at a pre-determined time announced through CPI social media. As the clock counts down to the moment we begin to give the plants away, hundreds of students gather in crowds and learn how to care for their new plant and get more involved in the green industry.

CPI gained recognition and notoriety with every successful plant drop; students would place CPI stickers on their water bottles, share pictures of the event on social media, and follow us on our own platforms of Instagram and Facebook. CPI has successfully hosted plant drops at many college campuses including University of Florida, Cornell, Penn State, Ohio State and University of Michigan, to name a few.

News outlets began to report on our plant drops and amplify our message to get college students interested in plants. In plant drops at the University of Florida and Texas A&M, 1,000 plants found new homes with college students in less than four minutes!

CPI was on track to begin a series of plant drops at colleges on the West Coast in 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic halted travel and social gatherings. With our plant drop plans cancelled, we decided to pivot to hosting virtual "Seed Drops" to continue to capture college students' attention. Signup forms were made available on our website and advertised through our social media channels. We were able to



The Collegiate Plant Initiative was founded to help cure "plant blindness" and help make college students more aware of the plants around them and what they have to offer.

mail thousands of seeds to college students across the country to begin their own gardens during quarantine and reap the emotional benefits of gardening during a stressful time.

Despite the change from in-person plant drops to virtual seed drops, CPI's social media following and engagement continued to grow. This showed us that we could achieve the same goal of attracting more followers and boosting meaningful engagement while reducing the logistical planning of campus plant drops to a more streamlined and universally available seed drop method. In this way, we are able to reach more students at more universities than we ever could with in-person plant drops, thus tapping us into our target demographic at a faster pace than ever before. Although we missed the social interaction of visiting college campuses, seeds have a better shelf life — and saved us a ton of money on travel costs!

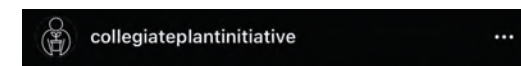
## STARTING PLANT CONVERSATIONS

After gaining students' attention with our plant drops and seed drops, CPI maintains student engagement through an active social media presence on Instagram and Facebook. We continue to share posts on plant care, industry trends and plant science news. Our most popular installments have been #PlantMemeMondays, which embeds a piece





On-campus plant drops, where students receive free plants and information on how to grow them, have become one of the Collegiate Plant Initiative's most popular events at colleges (above). Humorous social media memes are another way the Collegiate Plant Initiative is reaching out to college students (right).



Me, explaining to my friends that there are free plants everywhere:



of information about plants into one of the popularly shared memes on social media, reaching thousands of users.

Although we share information with our audience, CPI is also focused on getting our audience feedback on what they love about plants. This is the second prong of our organization's mission, to figure out the plants college students' love best. By tracking interactions with our posts on different topics, we know exactly which plants students love and buy, and which ones they leave on the shelf.

Social media is a unique avenue for information exchange among today's college students. This is very important because they are tomorrow's young affluent consumers and educated employees of the horticulture industry. It is an avenue more popular with this demographic than any other generation before them, with more reach and less expense than any other method currently available (i.e., flyers, cable television, magazine advertisements). CPI knows this audience the best and is engaging with college students in the most relatable form because it is run by members of this same demographic, members that inherently know and understand what this audience will react to, what they need to hear and see, and what they want to buy.

The third objective that has evolved out of CPI's mission is to help the people who love plants find careers in the horticulture industry. We know that a large percentage of jobs in the horticulture industry go unfilled each year. CPI has naturally progressed from attracting college students' attention in pursuit of our goal to combat plant blindness, to exposing them to the various career paths available for all majors in the horticulture industry.

In 2020 just before the pandemic shut down much of life as we know it, CPI organized our first "Student Drop." This three-day event took 35 students from five major U.S. Land-Grant Universities down through South Florida to network with representatives from the Florida plant industry.

The major goal of the Student Drop was to connect the college students that were looking for jobs and internships with companies that were ready to hire them. Three UF-IFAS Research and Education Centers (MFREC, GCREC and TREC) were the sites of reverse-career fairs, at which students

set up their own tables with their personal displays and resumes and company representatives walked around and met with them. In between travelling to these sites, the Student Drop also stopped to tour several different companies such as Driscoll's Berry Farm, Costa Farms and ForemostCo.

By the end of the trip, at least one-third of the students had secured follow-up interviews or offers for jobs and internships. Based on this level of success, CPI is a natural fit to become a sustainable pipeline of top-tier college talent to the horticulture and plant industry.

## HOW GROWERS CAN BENEFIT

Growers can benefit from CPI's unique access to its college-aged audience to draw attention to their plant selections by donating to our seed drops. This is one of the easiest ways to gain massive exposure of your plant products to young consumers across the country and we are always open to distributing new seeds to students.

Growers can also tap into our expanded pool of top-tier educated potential job applicants. 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! Reach out to us with information about your company, jobs, and internship program. We can direct our audience to your company to fill those positions.

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, Costa Farms, Scott's Company, PeaceTree Farm and the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences. ■

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