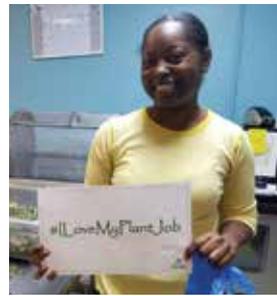




TELL YOUR STORY Nearly 58,000 new horticulture jobs open up every year — but employers are hard pressed to find qualified candidates. Through online campaigns, strategic partnerships and firsthand accounts from real industry members, Seed Your Future aims to expand the pipeline of future leaders.

MAKING HORTICULTURE COOL



A new movement aims to show young people just how much the floral industry has to offer.

BY BRUCE WRIGHT

For those who work with flowers and plants every day and who know just how rewarding that can be, it's hard to imagine, but it's true: The plants industry has a hiring crisis on its hands.

Yes, we also call that industry "horticulture"— and that's part of the problem. Among the key findings of research conducted by Seed Your Future, a broad-based movement created to respond to the challenge, fewer than half of survey participants between the ages of 18 and 34 even knew what "horticulture" means.

The implications of such unfamiliarity came home to Anna C. Ball, co-chair of Seed Your Future (and president and CEO of the 111-year-old Ball Horticultural Company), when she was visiting a university campus a couple of years ago, talking to horticulture majors about all the things they could do with that degree.

"One young woman came up to me, an undergrad, almost teary-eyed," Ball remembers. "She had been majoring in engineering and wanted to switch to horticulture, but her parents wouldn't let her, because they had never heard of the word."

At a time when college graduates often have a hard time finding jobs that meet their expectations, opportunities in the horticulture industry are plentiful and diverse. On average, nearly 58,000 new horticulture jobs open up every year — but employers are hard pressed to find qualified candidates. Statistics from 2014 suggest that in that year, 39 percent of those positions went unfilled.

And while the shortage of recruits is here already, the real crisis looms in the near future. Enrollment in training and higher-education programs in horticulture is on the decline. Young people, many of whom live with their attention glued to their phones, suffer disproportionately from "plant-blindness"— a widespread affliction. The average American can recognize 1,000 logos but can identify fewer than 10 plants in the local environment.



“We have these growing movements — farm to table, field to vase — that are so wonderful,” said Susan E. Yoder, executive director of Seed Your Future. “But so far they do not translate to an awareness of the essential role plants play in our daily lives — and that, by the way, there are some terrific careers available in this field.”

Youth Speaks

The Seed Your Future movement was born in 2013, at a meeting of the American Society for Horticultural Science. It quickly grew to embrace a coalition of more than 150 partners, from horticulture companies to nonprofits, schools and youth groups.

With funding from Ball Horticultural Company and Longwood Gardens, among others, the first phase of the

Seed Your Future project was launched: research. Surveys and focus groups confirmed that Americans, and especially young people, not only lack awareness but also entertain misperceptions about jobs in horticulture.

“If you don’t know about the diversity of those careers, your only image might be of someone who gets paid to mow the lawn in the middle of the summer, which is a hot, sweaty job,” said Ball. “People don’t know that horticulture jobs can involve art, design, technology and science — jobs where you’re indoors and jobs where you’re outdoors. A lot of people we employ get out in the field or walk the greenhouses, but also work behind a desk. Horticulture jobs involve working with plants, but also doing business. There are a lot of good combinations.”

The phrase “green-collar jobs” nicely captures the idea of a different path from traditional office work or manual labor, she added. Researchers also confirmed that young people find the term horticulture “weird.” (Floriculture, by the way, is considered a discipline of horticulture.)

The kids were quite willing, however, to suggest alternatives. Job descriptions such as “plant specialist” or “plantologist” were among many they threw out.

A common misperception is that horticulture jobs are low-paid across the board. At the same time, Seed Your Future’s research revealed that young people are motivated by more than

money. Many have a strong desire to make an impact on the world around them. On that basis, horticulture has urgent appeal. What remains is to make the connection — to show how.

Real People

Communicating the diversity and impact of careers in horticulture is the next phase of the Seed Your Future project — already launched, in April 2018, with a campaign targeted to middle schoolers, called BLOOM!

“We wanted to start by talking to this age group, because we know this is a key time when young people start to think about their choice of career,” said Yoder.

At WeAreBLOOM.org and on YouTube (at WeAreBLOOM), short videos give a lively picture of horticulture jobs you never knew existed. A young woman (one of only two in major-league baseball history) takes pride in her role as head groundskeeper for the Baltimore Orioles, where she maintains the thick, pattern-mowed sod on the playing field (a separate video explains why real grass makes the game better). The plant keeper at the Jacksonville, Florida Zoo and Gardens grows a special variety of ginger to feed to the gorillas. Other videos relate horticulture jobs to art, fashion, food culture, plant science and design.

“The videos incorporate a lot of the language that kids suggested to us in our research,” said Yoder. “The strategy is

SHARE THE LOVE

Anna Ball and Susan E. Yoder will be talking about Seed Your Future this month during SAF Palm Springs 2018. Look for coverage in *Floral Management* and SAF’s member newsletters.



THE PLACES YOU'LL GO Seed Your Future aims to communicate the diversity and impact of careers in horticulture through campaigns such as BLOOM!, which is targeted at middle school students.

to start with topics that the kids already care about and show how that is connected to plants."

Mission: Possible

The BLOOM! campaign is only the first step in a five-year plan (and more) spelled out in the Strategic Business Plan published on the Seed Your Future website, **SeedYourFuture.org**.

"We intend to have many different kinds of campaigns," said Yoder. "Our second campaign will be college and university focused. You might have undeclared or unhappy majors. How do you convert them to horticulture?"

Important to the mission of Seed Your Future is that supporters understand it is not a membership-based organization, but a collaborative movement, Yoder explained, meant to embrace industry, educators, nonprofit groups and individuals.

As an example, one of Seed Your Future's prominent partners is Scholastic, the educational publisher and media company, a powerful ally when it comes to getting the word out about horticulture careers to young people, teachers and parents. The plan is for Scholastic to create curricular materials that live on a custom, co-branded microsite, available and promoted to teachers, **Scholastic.com/BLOOM**.

While Scholastic is a multinational company, other partners include local garden clubs and youth groups.

"Part of what we wanted to create from the beginning were actual tools that partners can use," said Yoder. "You will see partner tool kits on our website. They include infographics that people can use today to help promote, not just interest in horticulture careers, but general awareness of plants, the benefits they bring and how important they are to the future." 🌱

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