"Hiring Horticulture Graduates" or "Where Are the Horticulture Graduates"

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The ornamental horticulture industry, including nursery production, landscaping, grounds management, and garden center and retail sales is experiencing the greatest growth and sales in its history. The demand for nursery stock, goods, and services has exceeded all expectations, and it will continue. One result of this growth has been an increasing demand for trained horticulturists, but there are not enough to satisfy that demand. Student enrollment in ornamental horticulture is declining at a time when demand for BS graduates exceeds the supply. At present, there are five to 10 job openings for every graduate. Why is this happening? There are several reasons, but the one of primary importance is low income potential, especially low starting salaries. It is difficult to attract students to a profession that offers a marginal income.

In the early 1960s, our dean of agriculture met with our horticulture faculty and said, "Get more undergraduates or give up your teaching program." We had 12 to 16 students at the time. As a result of the dean's meeting, we prepared career brochures, career slide sets, solicited scholarships, and started a massive letterwriting campaign to extension agents, vocational agriculture teachers, high school counselors, home economics teachers, biology teachers, nurserymen, greenhouse operators, retail florists, orchardists, and vegetable growers asking for names of junior or high school students interested in plants. After names were received, we went after them as coaches go after athletes. All of this effort paid dividends with increased enrollment.

These high enrollment levels continued through the 1970s. Increasing public interest in the environment and returning to nature resulted in large student enrollments in pertinent subjects. However, few of these students entered ornamental horticulture industries. In the 1980s, we have seen a decline in the number of students who enroll in horticultural subjects. Engineering, business, and computer technologies are stimulating their interests with intriguing incentives: opportunities to be creative, reasonable hours, good working environments and relationships, attractive starting salaries, and opportunities for advancement.

Perhaps we college and university teachers, researchers, and extension faculty have not continued to do a good job of recruiting or of promoting the profession. Perhaps we should recognize the fact that one of the best places to recruit and promote is on campus. A number of students come to college with no definite career in mind. For example, there are many students in our College of Arts and Sciences who have not chosen designated majors; some may be potential horticulturists. But parents and teachers still need to know of the opportunities and opportunities available in horticulture, and we as educators and leaders in the industry must tell them.

You, the employer, owner, or manager, need to take the time to tell those junior and high school students who work for you about horticultural careers and opportunities. Although they may have worked for you for one or more summers or years, they may not know of the career opportunities or how to prepare for them.

No matter how well we promote our profession and industry, no matter how good our recruiting practices are, students will not enroll in horticulture majors if income potentials are unattractive. Low starting salaries and long working hours have discouraged many potential students of horticulture. Many of our graduates start at low salaries, and it takes 5 to 10 years for those salaries to become comparable to those of other college graduates. Last year we graduated 42 students, and 10 reported starting salaries in the $12,000 range. The average starting salary for graduates of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences was $15,645. Horticulture students take the same amount of time and effort obtaining their degrees as do other majors, but the starting salaries offered are too low. For example, many teachers start at $18,000 for a 10-month work year, and the starting salary for a Virginia Cooperative Extension Service agent is $22,887. Starting salaries for horticulture graduates should be $18,000 to $20,000, especially for those who have one or more summers of co-op work experience.

Employers should place themselves in the financial shoes of the college graduates they hope to hire. There are student loans to be repaid, rent for housing, car payment and operating expenses, food, clothes, and relocating costs. A single professional employee can quickly accumulate $1,000 to $1500 per month in fixed costs for food, shelter, transportation, and clothing. Consequently, even an $18,000 to $20,000 annual salary may not be adequate once the deduction for taxes, insurance, and social security are subtracted. Horticultural industries have been reporting record sales and income; why not pass some of it on to employees?