

Recruiting and Training Tomorrow's Propagators[®]

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INTRODUCTION

The Problem. Everyone in commercial horticulture is finding it difficult to recruit new staff at all levels — but especially those with an ability to learn essential skills and who have an aptitude to supervise and manage. As I.P.P.S. members we all enjoy our work within the horticulture industry, especially where it is linked to propagation. But very few of today's young people see horticulture as a rewarding career.

The Reasons. There are many reasons for this but chief among these is that horticulture is not seen for what it is, an industry that improves everybody's quality of life. In short it does not have an appealing image. This is in part because horticulture is linked, in most peoples' minds, to agriculture with its associated problems. In addition, parents and mentors, including those in the careers service, see employment in a vocational industry that requires manual skills as a failure.

Within the United Kingdom there has been a financial incentive to keep all young people on at school to follow academic studies aimed at university, rather than consider a vocational career.

The pressures of the National Curriculum have meant that opportunities for young people to look at industries outside school are few and there are limited opportunities to introduce horticulture into the curriculum at Key Stages 3 and 4 when school students are beginning to consider their future career path.

Competition from abroad and the well-known barriers to obtaining adequate prices for horticultural products restricts the ability of businesses to invest in facilities and staff, and in particular influences the wages paid across much of the industry.

THE SOLUTIONS

Improve Horticulture's Image. There are a number of government initiatives that may help, in time, including the Green Spaces Initiative which is funding a body to ensure that new developments in urban areas have sufficient attention paid to open space and its associated planting. There are also moves to look at existing open spaces and to mobilise the surrounding communities to take ownership of these spaces and to use them.

National organisations, including Lantra, The Horticultural Trades Association, The National Farmers Union, The Institute of Horticulture, The Royal Horticultural Society, and The British Association of Landscape Industries are now working together to put across one united and positive message about horticulture and its value to society.

Every horticultural business can also help on a local basis by talking up the industry and using the local media, press, radio, and television to inform people about their successes. The big new order, the new cultivar, the award won at the local show, the successes of staff in achieving training awards are just a few examples.

The School Curriculum. Recent legislation has opened the way for schools to offer vocational study routes as well as academic ones and a new initiative for schools to adopt a rural dimension within the curriculum is also proposed. This provides an opportunity for horticultural topics to be included within the curriculum along with an opening for businesses to become involved. Think about how you can offer expertise and/or facilities for science or business-based projects to your local school — and so give yourself the ideal opportunity to introduce the pupils to an exciting industry. Education Business Partnerships can assist with gaining access to schools, their staff are familiar with the schools in their area and know who are the best staff to contact. They can help you to help the school and your business at the same time.

Promote a Positive Image for Horticulture. Many people have no idea what the word horticulture means and if anyone dares ask we tend to confuse them utterly by talking about amenity horticulture, production horticulture, fruit, protected cropping, propagation, landscaping, sports turf, etc. Initially it is important just to promote “horticulture” and let the various sectors fall into place at a later date. It is also important to talk about the successes of the industry and not dwell on the problems; it is a successful industry with a great career potential, so let's talk it up.

Young people look for information on the Internet today and a good, informative website is needed. Lantra is establishing a website for the land-based industries, with a section on horticulture that links to the dedicated websites of the organisations listed earlier so that positive information can be accessed easily.

Additionally, any printed material that is produced should convey the same message. Limiting the amount of different materials produced may help to reduce the confusion that currently exists.

Another opportunity that is so often missed is the work experience week that most school students are sent on. Horticulture tends to be sent the less academically able but why not ask your local school to seek out the potential high fliers and spend the week showing them the potential of your business and the industry, rather than leaving them weeding, watering, or potting for the duration of their stay?

The Horticultural Academy. It is important to make it attractive for young people to enter the industry and for career changers to be able to afford to join and train. This can be achieved by using The Horticultural Academy. This is a scheme operated by the industry in tandem with Pershore College. The horticultural business works with local schools and uses local advertising to recruit 18-year-old individuals with some advanced qualifications such as A-levels or a GNVQ. The business then employs these trainees, providing free training and the opportunity to gain practical experience in all aspects of the work. A work-based mentor is also required to guide and supervise their work-based training and studies.

The trainees are enrolled onto a Foundation Degree in Production Horticulture (linked to their particular sector) at Pershore College, where they attend 8 weeks of block-release over 2 years and participate in distance learning and work-based projects and assignments. They achieve their Foundation Degree at the end of Year 2 and can then progress to an Honours Degree with a further year's study.

By using this route the trainee will acquire a nationally recognised qualification and sound practical skills, while earning a wage and having the cost of the training paid for. They will therefore not be saddled with debt at the end of the training and will be in a position to take up a responsible position. Additionally the industry will gain bright, practically competent supervisors and managers to ensure its survival and continued growth.

Develop Existing Staff. Finally what about your existing staff? Have you anyone who, with encouragement and appropriate training, can be developed further? It is usually cheaper to develop an existing member of staff than to recruit someone new.

A Career at Last®

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THE EARLY YEARS

A career in horticulture had never been a consideration until I was in my mid-thirties and even then it just evolved, rather than being part of some predetermined plan.

For as long as I can remember I have had an interest in plants. One of my earliest memories and first attempts at propagation was germinating and growing a broad bean in a jar, from there I progressed to mustard and cress which was even better as this could be eaten a few days after sowing.

Also, as a child I remember eagerly awaiting the new seed catalogue each autumn, looking through the pages of perfect vegetables and all those colourful flowers that could be yours for the price of a packet of seeds. Through those years of growing up I was never happier than when I was 'helping' my Father on his allotment.

At school there was absolutely no reference to horticulture as a possible career. Rural studies, where pupils were allowed into the greenhouse, was only for those who were less able, such was the image horticulture portrayed.

I opted for a career in catering and left school at 16 years, with five O-Levels, to go to the local technical college where I studied for 2 years and gained City and Guilds and Hotel and Catering Institute qualifications. I was going on to further studies, but love took a hand and I married 3 months after leaving College. I found employment as cook in a staff restaurant, which lasted for 2 years until our son was born and that was the end of my first career.

Being a wife and mother dominated the next few years and I took a job as an evening shelf-filler in a supermarket. When my son started school I was able to transfer to day shifts and I progressed to being in charge of stock control and ordering for the store. While I quite enjoyed my job, after 12 years I knew I didn't want to spend the rest of my working life there. I now had the chance to do something different, but what?

HORTICULTURE AS A CAREER

During this period we had moved house several times, each time to a property with a larger garden. The penultimate property had a reasonable amount of garden for a