

# Today's learners, tomorrow's leaders

## Chemeketa Community College equips tomorrow's growers with an education and hands-on horticulture experience

By Peter Szymczak

Plant science has been a neglected subject of learning in grades kindergarten through 12 for the past few generations. Simultaneously, many Future Farmers of America programs have gone by the wayside, particularly in the cities.

Admissions to college and university horticulture programs, however, are on the rise. "There's a newfound appreciation for plants and their role in the environment," said Gail Gredler, horticulture instructor at Chemeketa Community College. "There's more interest in organic farming and growing your own food."

Despite this optimistic trend, the green industry faces a worrisome shortage of workers that will likely worsen if current growth projections hold true.

According to one recent study, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics predicted an average of 12 percent job growth in the horticultural industry between now and 2020. Job opportunities for landscapers, groundskeepers and nursery workers are expected to grow 18 percent, while plant scientists can expect about 16 percent more jobs by 2018.

"There's demand right now for a college-educated workforce that knows the basics and comes already equipped with a certified pesticide applicator's license," said Val Tancredi, OAN Willamette Chapter president. "These people form a second-tier salary package — not a four-year degree package. That's the niche community colleges fill."

Helping meet this demand is the two-year horticulture program at Chemeketa Community College, where the focus is on nursery and greenhouse management. Some students enroll in the program with aspirations of starting their own nursery, while others are simply in search of a cubicle-free career.

Students who graduate with a hor-



Horticulture students at Chemeketa Community College inspect seedlings that will fill hanging flower baskets sold at the Willamette Chapter's annual plant sale, a fundraiser for student scholarships and program improvements. PHOTO BY CURT KIPP

ticulture degree need not go far to seek employment: almost 40 percent of the total sales generated by the nursery and greenhouse industry in Oregon — more than \$744 million in 2014 — takes place within the college's service district of Marion and Polk counties.

### Chapter contributions pay off

"We're their home team, you might say," said Tancredi, who serves as an adjunct faculty member, lecturing regularly on irrigation. Other Willamette Chapter members address classes occasionally on their areas of expertise, from propagation to proper pruning practices.

In addition, the Willamette Chapter has donated more than \$20,000 to Chemeketa's horticulture program. The money has helped procure everything from a pick-up truck to tools and supplies, such as sod mixes, pots and

chemicals. It has allowed Chemeketa to renovate old hoop houses and install new epoxy-coated workbenches with bench heating, overhead microbe sprinklers, fog systems and drip irrigation on baskets.

"The idea is to expose students to state-of-the-art equipment," Tancredi said. "These donations show our commitment. We feel it's important to dedicate resources to educating replacement workers here in our community colleges for the number one segment of our agriculture."

### Horticulture education takes root

Chemeketa's horticulture program began in 2006 on a miniscule budget. As a result, some of the program's infrastructure is in various states of refurbish.

"The greenhouses are still in good shape, but the Willamette Chapter has helped us to be strategic about what we can still invest money in," said Joel ▶

Keebler, who became Chemeketa's director of agricultural sciences in 2014. He oversees Chemeketa's horticulture and agribusiness management programs, based in Salem, as well as a Wine Studies program based in Eola and McMinnville. Currently, Chemeketa's Salem campus has 40 full-time and 25 part-time horticulture students.

"All of our classes in ag science are a combination of lecture and lab, where you get the hands-on experience," Keebler said. "That's part of the appeal to the program. If you study plant propagation, you get your hands on some

seeds and cuttings. Book learning only gets you so far."

Coursework covers a range of topics including integrated pest management, plant identification, composting and horticultural marketing. Courses in "Ecological Horticulture" emphasize sustainability through the use of plants for storm water retention, environmental restoration, water and energy conservation, phytoremediation, carbon sequestration and food production.

"We're trying to educate students and prepare them for the mid-level posi-

tions," Keebler said. "One of the traditions in the nursery industry is you start at the bottom and work your way up. We're hoping that through their knowledge and experiences, our students will work their way up quickly."

Two to three times a year, the college hosts plant sales to give students the experience of selling plants in a retail environment. The Willamette Chapter's annual plant sale, held every April at the Oregon Ag Fest, provides another learning opportunity: the chapter sources hanging flower baskets grown

## Dedication and a dream

Honoring **Soledad Garcia** — Chemeketa Community College's Horticulture Student of the Year

As Congress debates immigration reform (or not, as the case may be), immigrants continue to make a major impact in today's green industry.

To support this vital segment of agriculture's labor force, Chemeketa Community College participates in the federally funded TRIO Program, which focuses on underserved communities including the Latino population. The goal is to attract more first-generation immigrants into horticulture.

"That's definitely an area for potential growth," said Joel Keebler, director of agricultural sciences at Chemeketa.

Soledad Garcia is a shining example of realizing this potential. The Mexican immigrant — and star pupil — was named 2015 Horticulture Student of the Year at a presentation ceremony this past April.

"I have always wanted to continue my education," said Garcia, who only went up to the ninth grade in Mexico. She was born and raised in a little village in the municipality of Valparaiso, located in the southwest of the state of Zacatecas.

She and her husband immigrated to the U.S. in 1990 with dreams of earning vocational degrees. He graduated from Chemeketa with a computer electronics



Joleen Schilling (left) and Gail Gredler (center), horticulture instructors at Chemeketa Community College, present a certificate of achievement to the "2015 Horticulture Student of the Year" — Soledad Garcia. With this honor came a \$250 award and a pair of professional gardening shears.

PHOTO BY PETER SZYMCAK

degree in 2012, then her opportunity came.

"I always liked to work with plants, so when I saw the horticulture program, I thought that was a good idea," Garcia said.

She started classes during the 2012 summer term and will graduate with an associate's horticulture degree in nursery and greenhouse production this year.

A mother of five children spanning in age from 24 to 16, Garcia has attended school while raising her family. It has been a challenge — but more so, an opportunity to set an example for her children. In fact, she and one of her sons started school at Chemeketa at the same time, and they are on track to graduate together.

As a native Spanish speaker, Garcia has also found it challenging to get her education while still learning and perfecting the English language.

"Generally, foreign language students have to put more energy into the learning because of the language barrier," said

Joleen Schilling, horticulture instructor at Chemeketa. To assist students with their coursework, the school provides tutors in the on-campus Writing Resource Center.

Sometimes, however, it's the student who does the tutoring.

"One thing that impressed me about Soledad was her willingness to help other students with their Spanish," Schilling said. "Soledad gave her study time, which she could have been using for her own coursework, to interpret instructions in Spanish. Time and again, she went out of her way to help other students."

Garcia plans to put her degree in action at "a little property" she and her husband purchased in 2013. "It needs a lot of work, but we are planning a project to start a greenhouse production for a specialty crop," Garcia said.

She would like to continue her education at Oregon State University, but is unsure since it's quite a financial challenge. Whether or not she pursues an advanced degree, she has ample reason to be proud of her accomplishments thus far.

"It has been the opportunity of my life," Garcia said. "Since I was little, I always dreamed of being an educated person." ☺

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on a contract basis by horticulture students at Chemeketa.

Two terms of Spanish are also required for Chemeketa's horticulture students. "It's just practical," Gredler said. "The majority of students are English speakers. In terms of being a crew leader or any function within the industry, you need to know Spanish."

Since the green industry workforce in Oregon is largely Latino, native Spanish speakers who are also conversant in English have a big advantage.

### Internships provide a pathway to new employees

"Cooperative work experiences," more commonly known as internships, are a primary way students get hands-on experience — and get more people into the industry. It's not uncommon for a student to be offered a job after successfully completing an internship.

"We're hearing more and more from nurseries who are reaching out and offering internships, and nursery owners who are looking for referrals of student grads available to hire," Gredler said.

Chemeketa requires students to complete six credits, or 180 hours of on-the-job experience. "Some people want to go into a retail nursery, for instance," Gredler said. "Students need to find an internship that will suit them best and that offers the best learning opportunity while contributing to what they want to do long term," she stressed.

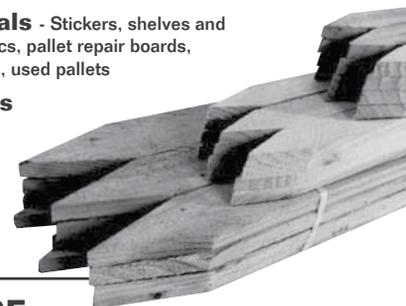
Students must write up a set of learning objectives, which must be signed off on by the student, the internship coordinator and the person offering the internship. "It's a contract that makes everybody aware of just how important the experience is," Gredler said.

Omar Martinez, a 22-year-old horticulture student who is on track to graduate in the summer of 2015, spoke about his experience in the internship program at Bailey Nurseries. "They let me experience all aspects of the nursery, from container and shipping to greenhouse, sales and even the shop — I even got to learn how to weld a ▶

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little!” he said. “I went into the internship wanting to see it all, from top to bottom, just to see how everything works, but also to find what I’m really good at. It made me realize where my skills could work the best.”

“A lot of students don’t have a very long resume,” Gredler said. “So, if they have a successful internship in an area along the lines of what they want to do, that’s something to put on your resume that’s not just a degree. The industry wants people who have worked.”

### Nurturing the next crop of students

“Chemeketa is excited to work with the industry to let people know about the large number of career opportunities in the horticulture field,” said Joleen Schilling, Chemeketa’s incoming horticulture instructor. Schilling is in the process of taking over the reins from

Gredler, who is retiring.

Strengthening the rapport between the industry and educators “would contribute to getting more students in the classrooms, in the internships, and into jobs,” Schilling said. “It’s a diverse industry that touches all aspects of our lives. You just need to find your niche — whether it’s technology or working outside with plants — and make a career of it.”

Chemeketa is primed for growth to keep pace with workforce needs. College administrators have designated about three undeveloped acres on the campus as the future home of Agricultural Sciences. Plans are to build a brand-new Ag Sciences complex.

“We’re hoping that our good friends in the Willamette Chapter will help us with a capital campaign to have bigger and better facilities,” Keebler said.

The Willamette Valley has been

blessed with a temperate climate and fertile soils ideal for growing plant material, but “you’re only as good as your workforce,” Tancredi said.

To keep the green industry staffed, monetary contributions, scholarships and mentoring are a few ways to invest in the next generation of growers. Still, “there’s a big gap in the industry,” Schilling said. “Many nursery owners are ready to retire and pass the business over to somebody. This is the generation to take that torch, whether it’s students coming out of a two- or four-year school. Internships are a great way to get their feet in the door.” ☺

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