

# FUTURE PEOPLE

BY PETER SZYMCZAK

**T**HE LAW OF attraction, colloquially speaking, goes like this: “You catch more flies with honey than you do with vinegar.” The horticulture industry is heeding this homespun wisdom as it tries to attract new workers to its ranks.

There’s good reason for sweetening the pitch. The average age of Oregon farmers and ranchers is at an all-time high — 60 years and climbing. The United States is on the cusp of the largest retirement of farmers in its history, with more farmers over the age of 75 than between the ages of 35 and 44.

Ideally, there would be a new generation to take the outgoing one’s place, but that is not the case.

A recent survey found only 26 percent of 18–24-year-olds agreed with the statement, “Horticulture is a diverse area of study, and it offers viable, fulfilling and respected career paths.”

Why have young adults today soured on horticulture? Partly because only one percent of the population is farmers, so many simply lack first-hand exposure to ag. The rest have been conditioned to associate jobs in horticulture with long hours, hard work and low pay.

## A honeypot of jobs

Maybe people would be sweeter on horticulture if they knew there’s a sur-

plus of jobs in desperate need of filling. According to 2014 statistics, only 61 percent of the expected 57,900 average annual openings available in the horticulture industry are likely to be filled.

These jobs include everything from greenhouse growers and plant propagators, to viticulturists and enologists; plant inspectors and diagnosticians; integrated pest management specialists; food scientists; arborists; natural lands managers; landscape architects, designers and contractors; irrigation specialists; master gardeners and retail garden center workers; floriculturists; groundskeepers; sports turf managers; horticultural therapists; geneticists and plant pathologists; and horticultural educators.

“There have never been so many opportunities to join the horticulture field,” Anna Ball, CEO of Ball Horticultural Company, said. “But awareness of these opportunities is at an all-time low.”

As co-chair of the Seed Your Future initiative, Ball has partnered with more than 150 organizations to grow the number of people pursuing horticulture-related professions. Their mission is to make people understand and appreciate the industry, and to encourage people to pursue careers in horticulture.

Susan E. Yoder is the executive director of Seed Your Future. She’s been taking



National FFA Association  
[www.ffa.org](http://www.ffa.org)

the organization’s message on the road, speaking at horticulture trade events.

“Over the past few decades, the general public has lost its connection to the plants around them,” Yoder said. “People think the only jobs in horticulture are cutting grass! Our goal is to show the diversity of job offerings so people can see just how robust the industry really is.”

## Plantologists wanted

Because the term “horticulture” is poorly understood and suffers from bad connotations, many universities and colleges now refer to the field as “plant sciences” in an effort to bolster enrollment. It’s important to use contemporary language that is easily understood, Yoder noted.

“‘Plant specialist’ resonates better than propagator; ‘turf specialist’ is more interesting than ‘lawn maintenance’ — just the difference in nomenclature receives more awareness of these jobs being available,” Yoder said.

Seed Your Future recently conducted focus groups with middle schoolers, and the results were encouraging. “We’ve realized so much of it is just [public relations] — making the public understand what we’re talking about when we say ‘horticulture.’”

If young people, their parents and other influencers, such as teachers and youth group leaders, can change their thinking about horticulture, then the hope is that they will become more involved in organizations such as the National Junior Horticultural Association, Junior Master Gardener, 4-H and the National FFA Association (formerly known as Future Farmers of America). These organizations can provide hands-on experience early in life, setting youths on a path toward 



Junior Master Gardener  
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## Future people

Public gardens are multifaceted workplaces, offering a wide range of employment opportunities. Staff needed to carry out day-to-day operations include gardeners, greenhouse growers, landscape designers, plant curators, administrators, marketers, facilities managers, communications experts, researchers and more. PHOTO COURTESY OF SEED YOUR FUTURE

careers working with plants.

“Having exposure to agriculture at an early age is key,” Nellie McAdams, director of Rogue Farm Corps, said. “FFA and 4H are crucial for allowing young people to understand their options and increasing their mentorship opportunities. There are a lot of career opportunities: you can be a plant producer or a plant pathologist, or work with the soil and water conservation district. There are so many ways people can engage in horticulture, and these organizations can open young people’s minds to their options.”

Founded in 2003, Rogue Farm Corps is a community of Southern Oregon farmers who provide beginning farmer training and mentoring. “We go to university job fairs, educating people about careers and training opportunities. A lot of people are interested in working in natural resources-



based careers, they just may not have an ‘in.’ Programs like ours provide internships where people can apply their skills and get mentoring from people who have been doing the work for a long time.”

## Education and beyond

Many Oregon high schools offer CTE (career and technical education) programs focused on horticulture. At Newberg High School, for instance, the elective hort program increased enrollment from 34 students in 2008, to 220 in 2012.

More remarkably, the program has survived in an era of school budget cuts by raising its own funding. The program does contract growing, holds a May plant sale and provides hanging baskets for a Rotary Club of Newberg fundraiser.

“The students not only are getting hands-on experience in horticulture, they are getting hands-on experience in business as well,” program instructor Pete Siderius said. “Every Monday in May the kids come into the classroom and the first thing they want to know is: ‘How were

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sales for the past weekend?”

While this program provides a great introduction to the profession, it's more imperative than ever that these students continue their education by pursuing horticulture-related degrees in two-year and four-year colleges and universities.

“Students need education after high school to earn a family-wage job — that is the biggest change over the past two generations. But it need not be a four-year college,” said Jennifer Satalino of the Educational Credit Management Corporation. ECMC is a non-profit organization that assists students and their families plan and pay for college.

Satalino helps qualified students participate in the Oregon Promise, the state education grant program that launched last year. The program covers most tuition for recent Oregon high school graduates with at least a 2.5 GPA and GED recipients who are seeking to enroll in an Oregon community college within six months of graduation.

“By giving all high school seniors the message that they can go to college for minimal cost, the hope is that we will have more students interested in going to college than in the past, due to cost concerns,” Satalino said.

Oregon community colleges offer certificate and degree programs specifically geared toward preparing students for mid-to upper level positions in the horticulture industry, so the means are certainly there.

What's key is to have more people acquiring an appetite for horticulture as a profession. Perhaps the industry can ride the wave of interest that has been generated around food.

“The movement of farm-to-table cuisine, which has been seen in the rise of school gardens, and even within flowers, the field-to-vase movement, these are providing the missing link, the realization that these are jobs,” Yoder said. ©

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