



An employee performs skilled grafting techniques in a nursery setting.

PHOTO BY CURT KIPP

Hired help

What it takes for nurseries to find the workforce talent they need

BY JON BELL

WORKING IN THE NURSERY industry is not easy. Laborers in the fields endure harsh weather conditions and strenuous work that can test their physical endurance. Drivers spend long hours on the road away from their families. Growers and production staff have to constantly monitor crops to ensure they're healthy and on track.

"You don't get a reset if you have an issue and a crop fails," said Margaret Whealdon, a senior human resources generalist at **Smith Gardens**, a grower of annuals and perennials headquartered in Bellingham, Washington. "I think some people don't realize — this is really hard work. People who do this do it because they love it and have a passion for it."

Almost as hard as the work itself: finding the people to do the work. Oregon's nursery industry alone employs more than 23,000 workers throughout the year. Many of those workers are seasonal laborers tending to the physical work of running a nursery: plant-

ing, fertilizing, watering, digging, packing, shipping. For years, a labor shortage has made it hard for nurseries to fill those roles.

But beyond that, experienced nursery and field managers and educated horticultural specialists also fill key positions to keep nurseries running smoothly. As it is with laborers, finding good people to occupy those roles can be challenging, too, thanks to an industry shortage, an aging workforce and the loss of some horticulture programs at universities and colleges around the country.

"It's hard work and you really have to love what you do. That's always going to be a big challenge," Whealdon said. "But we're hopeful. We always get our guy. We always get our girl. We just have to persevere and keep our eye on the ball."

A shallower pool

Generally speaking, most nurseries are looking to hire all kinds of workers. Part of that comes from the fact that the **>>**

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industry has seen an unexpected boom during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has found more people staying at home and, as a result, tending to their landscaping and gardens.

“We’ve just seen a real resurgence of the customer base,” said Nathan Lamkey, president of **McHutchison** and **Vaughan’s Horticulture** in Naperville, Illinois. “The stay-at-home culture we had the last year brought us so many new consumers and so much more demand. It’s really great for our industry, but with that demand, the question becomes: How do you grow sustainably and find the right people?”

Finding field laborers can be tough because of the nature of the work, immigration issues and other challenges. Positions that require lots of industry experience or higher education degrees — think associate or bachelor’s degrees — are equally hard to fill.

“There’s definitely a shortage of people with horticulture backgrounds and with the right talents and skill sets to meet the needs,” Lamkey said. “I’m not saying they’re not out there, but the pool is limited.”

Part of the reason the pool is so shallow is because, in recent years, colleges and universities around the country have been scaling back horticulture programs due to diminishing demand. More students have been pursuing business, marketing and tech-

nology-related degrees, which has diminished demand and interest in horticulture.

“Colleges are dropping their programs, and that’s concerning to us,” said Pam Evans, human resources manager for **J. Frank Schmidt & Son Co.**, a wholesale grower of shade, flowering and specialty ornamental trees in Boring, Oregon.

At the same time, older, more experienced nursery professionals are either retiring or approaching retirement in an aging workforce trend that’s tightening the labor pool even more. With a shallower labor pool, the qualified candidates are sought out by a larger number of prospective employers, so competition is stiff.



Previous page, top: Employees wrap racks of products at Smith Gardens in Aurora, Oregon. PHOTO BY BILL GOLOSKI
Bottom: Vaughan's Horticulture employee Ken Turrentine holds the Dümmer Orange, J'Adore poinsettia combinations grown at Smith Gardens Inc. PHOTO COURTESY OF SWINERTON

“When you have someone who has very specific knowledge, for example in soil science, all the nurseries want that person,” said Maria Surgnier, chief human resource officer for **DCA Outdoor Inc.**, a Kansas City-based nursery growing and distribution company. “There are a lot of companies hiring, so competition is a big challenge.”

Tracking down talent

For most nurseries, hiring never really stops.

“We’re always looking,” Evans said.

And what they’re looking for is a range of candidates who bring not only education but experience to the table.

“We’re always going to look at someone’s experience or background,” Surgnier said. “If someone was raised on a farm, that speaks very highly to us. Very rarely do we put a hard stance on the need to

have a degree.”

Evans echoed that sentiment, saying that when hiring farm managers, J. Frank Schmidt & Son looks for candidates with either a horticulture degree or at least five years’ experience in the field.

“That experience is valuable,” she said.

One way nursery operations find talent is by partnering with area colleges, universities and community colleges. Even though some have whittled down their horticultural offerings, there are still plenty who have programs. Whealdon said Smith Garden works with some nearby junior colleges and universities on an internship program; DCA Outdoor does, as well. Surgnier also said professors will occasionally refer students to the company, something DCA takes note of.

In addition, Surgnier said DCA works with candidates to kind of tailor positions

so that they will fit them well. They don’t post a full job description, but rather key responsibilities and critical success factors, which allows for a little more flexibility. DCA also uses a Culture Index Survey, which is a recruiting and management tool that helps employers identify employees’ traits and characteristics, and how they like to be motivated and communicated with.

Terri Cook, senior vice president of human resources for **Everde Growers**, a nursery with 14 farm locations across four states including Oregon, said she’s had good luck filling positions through the company’s internship program. Just recently, Everde hired three new employees, all of whom had interned with the company through their colleges. And not only is Everde adding skilled employees to its team, it’s also bringing in some much-needed younger faces. >>



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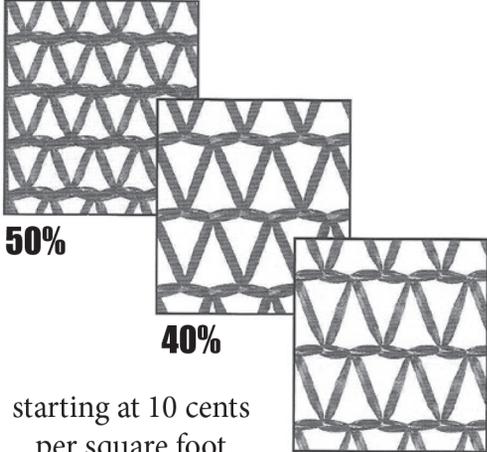
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Schwoppe Bros Tree Farms hosted a multi-week management skills training program for DCA Outdoor in Independence, Missouri. PHOTO COURTESY OF DCA OUTDOOR.

“We recognize that we’ve got to bring young bodies in and get them trained up,” she said. “It’s the future of the industry.”

Positive prospects

So, what are nurseries looking for in prospective employees aside from experience

and, where applicable, higher education?

For some, it’s a willingness to learn. J. Frank Schmidt & Son Co. offers a management training program as a way to help employees figure out what they’d like to do at the company while also educating them about every aspect of it. Evans said

employees in the program rotate throughout the company over a one- to two-year period, gaining experience in everything from tissue culture and containers to the various soil types in the different regions where J. Frank Schmidt has operations.

“They get a great opportunity and we grow them as employees by finding what their passion is,” she said. “It’s a great way for people to really get into the company and learn.”

Though the focus should be on horticulture and related fields, Cook said younger folks thinking about a career in the nursery industry would be wise to study business, as well. That way they learn the basics of what it takes to run a successful enterprise.

Whealdon said Smith Gardens is always on the lookout for people with a passion for the nursery industry.

“I think we look for people who, through the way they talk about their experience in growing or school, you can tell if they’re passionate,” she said. “We want people working here who are going to be working here for a long time. We are a forward- thinking company, and we’re looking for people with passion and curiosity and who are always questioning about how we can do this better.” ©

Jon Bell is an Oregon freelance journalist who writes about everything from Mt. Hood and craft beer to real estate and the great outdoors. His website is www.jbellink.com.



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