

GROWERTALKS

Corr on Cannabis

7/1/2018

“Plants is Plants”

Dr. Brian Corr

I always knew I wanted to grow plants. I propagated new plants from leaves of my grandmother's African violets. Somewhere, there's a photo of my young self with a tomato freshly picked from my first tomato plant.

Despite my love of growing things, I once considered a career change and became a music major. After one semester, I realized I needed more innate talent, more dedication, or ideally, more of both. I also realized how much I enjoyed working with growing things and the people who grow them. I came back to horticulture and never left. And the music world is better for that decision.

What decisions are young horticulture professionals making today? What effect is the rapid expansion of the cannabis industry having on career decisions being made by the newest generation of horticulturists?

I've heard of students graduating from horticulture programs being offered high five-figure or even six-figure starting salaries in the cannabis industry, sometimes with a few percent of equity in the company. That sort of offer is certainly tempting for a student who has accumulated student debt. Is the cannabis industry taking talent from traditional horticulture?

I spoke with an executive search consultant with several decades of experience recruiting for the green industry. He said the perception is that cannabis is having a major impact on greenhouse hiring. However, greenhouse vegetable hiring is also a factor. Federal immigration impediments to the hiring of labor—as well as the hiring of skilled, technically trained employees—is another immediate challenge for the greenhouse grower.

This executive search consultant pointed out there have been instances where a senior-level horticulture professional appears to have been hired for credentials alone, released once a license is secured, then replaced with a non-horticulturally trained cannabis grower.

Are traditional horticulture programs a source of cannabis professionals? Although universities in the United States risk losing federal funding if they discuss cannabis production, several university faculty members have told me students talk to them “in code,” asking about growing herbs or tomatoes, even though the professor suspects they really have no interest in either.

Professor Paul Thomas at the University of Georgia has heard horticulture grads are earning as much as 30% more in the cannabis industry in comparison to traditional horticulture. I asked Dr. Thomas what reasons he hears from graduates when they consider a position in a cannabis company. He said some are simply pro-cannabis and apply for that reason. Others are motivated by finances. He then mentioned a reason I hadn't considered—some of the dominant cannabis markets are destination areas due to climate and access to skiing, beaches, etc.

At Clemson University, Professor Jim Faust says the growth of the cannabis industry has been a net positive for the horticulture program. According to Dr. Faust, universities, including Clemson, are attracting students interested in cannabis production that might not otherwise enroll. When it comes to hiring those students, the green industry will win some and lose some, but increased student enrollment helps horticulture programs stay relevant. The competition for starting salaries can also be viewed positively from a recruitment perspective. Some students have worked for a while in the cannabis industry, then taken a position in the green industry.

At Colorado State University, Professor Steve Newman said approximately 20% of the students enrolled in the greenhouse program do so because they plan to enter the cannabis industry. Like faculty at other universities, Dr. Newman sees this not as cutting into candidates for the traditional horticulture industry, but expanding the size of the pool.

Tucker Cole, a graduate of the University of New Hampshire (and son of Doug Cole, owner of D.S. Cole), joined a cannabis cultivation facility after graduation and has remained in the cannabis industry. An attractive salary was part of the reason, but the opportunity to work in an exciting, rapidly growing industry played a role as well. He said the cannabis industry needs people with training in commercial horticulture as it transitions from small grow sites to large production facilities.

Sierra McDonald, a graduate of the horticulture program at Georgia, went into horticulture because of her love for plants and farming, and expected to be growing annuals or vegetables after graduation. However, the skills she learned at Georgia translated directly to cannabis production. For example, the basics of plant nutrition are easily transferred. However, she noted it's necessary to remember cannabis is a controlled substance and regulations require flawless tracking and sanitation.

Both Tucker and Sierra say their education in horticulture programs was good training for the cannabis industry. They rarely, if ever, hear any negative comments about their choice of working in cannabis. Both said they would consider taking a job in traditional horticulture, but don't have plans to do so at present.

For years I've said, "Plants is plants." A student well-educated in horticulture production science will adapt and be successful growing any crop. The cannabis industry is showing that to be true. **GT**

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