

GROWERTALKS

Acres & Acres

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What's a Horticulturist?

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And more importantly, do you want to be known as one? That question comes to mind this month after reading a couple of news pieces that touted “horticulturist” as a job that’s both desirable and necessary.

I’ll admit, seeing the word horticulturist in a headline excites me no end—it means the outside world knows we exist! I imagine weirkeepers and chimney sweeps feel much the same when they make the news.

Our recent press came in two forms. First, was a story in *Men’s Health UK* titled “The 10 Best Jobs for Men.” Horticulturist was No. 1, ahead of paramedic, photographer, DJ and jet pilot, among others. Cool, right?

Then I read the job description: “The art and science of garden management, often on a grand scale, combining agriculture, design and conservation.”

Garden management? Is that’s what horticulturists do? Don’t tell that to the head growers at Color Spot or Smith Gardens or Henry Mast Greenhouses.

The second piece, in the *Washington Post* garden section, was titled “Why We Need Horticulturists.” I hoped for the best, but the author, a respected garden writer, seems to have a narrow view of the term. He wrote:

“I believe this is an incredibly exciting time to get into horticulture for a number of reasons, namely the rise of the local food movement, as well as the need for people to grow the range of plants needed for the ecological repair of our damaged Earth. Think of all the aquatic grasses and marshland plants that have been raised in recent years to try to heal the Chesapeake Bay.”

Okay, he mentioned local food and native plants—two growth areas. He could have tossed in medical cannabis, too. But it was a good start to the piece.

Then he continued. And lost me completely:

“But in terms of sheer artistry, the action lies most in an area known as planting design, which might be regarded as a subset of landscape design: A designer or architect lays out a garden with, say, broad flower

beds or even a meadow if the property is large enough; the horticulturist skillfully paints the canvas with carefully considered plants.”

This is what a horticulturist does? And this is where the action is? Good grief, this kind of horticulture is for the one-percenters who summer in the Hamptons and winter in Palm Beach.

Now, I'm not saying the lucky few plant nerds who manage places like Kew Gardens or design grand gardens in the Hamptons aren't horticulturists—they are, and talented ones to boot. What frosts me is seeing horticulture being defined to the public as a glorified version of puttering in the garden. And seeing how not nearly enough folks want to putter in the garden for even an hour a week, why would they want to make a career of it? Especially young folks?

On top of that, other than a brief mention of local food, everything else in both pieces elevates horticulture to a position of blue-collar snobbery on the level of Rolex repairman or antique conservator.

Take the *Post* piece, for instance. The author waxes poetic about the work of Dutch garden designer Piet Oudolf and writes:

“Today's planting design practitioners have ... built on a palette of herbaceous plants—perennials and ornamental grasses—that are inherently wilder, closer to nature and richer in their form and variety. Moreover, flower color alone is not the driving ornament; rather, it is texture, line, form and an intangible, but powerful, sense of seasonal progression.”

Huh?

“It is inherently complex,” he concludes, as though he'd heard my grunt—“too interrelated to distill into a short column. I try to get my head around it by thinking of the block plant groupings as tonal music and the blended approach as atonal. Elgar vs. Schoenberg, perhaps. But listening to plant music is one thing, composing it is another. This, of course, is why we need skilled horticulturists to rise to the challenge.”

Good grief.

But hey, maybe I'm wrong. Maybe making horticulture sound like a snooty, exclusive form of gardening is better than revealing the sweaty, dirty reality of the commercial greenhouse.

But I don't think so.

To read the *Post* piece: <http://tinyurl.com/PostHorticulturist>

To read the *Men's Health* piece: <http://tinyurl.com/MensHealthHorticulturist>