GROWERTALKS

Columns

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Qualification: Education, Experience, Passion (Not Necessarily in That Order)

Sylvia Schaap

“In horticulture, the qualification of specialists is determined primarily by the depth of passion for their chosen career.” Anyone else having light bulbs go off after reading Albert Grimm’s column in the February issue?

I’d like to dissect that genius comment, kind of like that frog in high school biology. Starting at the end because it’s a very good place to start: “their chosen career.”

When I took the online career-matching test in Grade 9, the first result that came up was: model. Ha! How ridiculous. What could I model—rubber boots and muddy jeans?

The second result was more like it: horticulturist. It made sense with the way I answered the questions. Do you prefer working outdoors? Yes. Do you like nature? Naturally. How do you feel about a desk job? Skip.

But I’m one of the crazy few that would answer the questions in that way, so most kids wouldn’t end up with horticulturist in their top three career matches.

For those who haven’t grown up in or been exposed to our industry in any way, horticulture isn’t an obvious career option. That might be a problem. Who knows we exist? One thing I’ve learned in a population of undergraduates where we agriculture students (aka Aggies) represent a tiny fraction is that people think milk grows in grocery stores. Yes, they probably buy our gorgeous plants, but how can we expect young people to know there’s career potential in our industry when they likely don’t know we even exist? Even if we do exist in their minds, they might not realize we need more than green thumbs and strong arms; we need talent in all areas, from design and sales to engineering and plumbing.

And why, of all career options, would they choose to work in one that promises rivers of sweat and t-shirt tans?

Another problem Albert spoke of—those who do end up in horticulture school will probably come out with a degree, but will that piece of paper be of any use to you as an employer?

Yes, I've had classes during which we students calculate how much money each hour of that class was worth, as we feel we're learning nothing and wasting money.

However, most courses I've taken have been intensely interesting to a plant lover, with dedicated professors who are genuinely passionate about what they teach and where we students were captivated in every lecture. My classmates are in these classes because they're passionate about it; anyone who isn't crazy enough to answer yes to a question about whether they enjoy working with dirt won't be in that class. Most of us genuinely want to learn and are more concerned with coming out of a course more knowledgeable than whether they get an A or A-plus.

I know the years I've spent at school studying my chosen career have been irreplaceably useful.

Now, how about the "depth of passion" part?

My fellow Aggies are the one population of students most likely to have a passion for plants and are probably most willing to work in conditions our industry offers. However, mentioning ornamentals to them usually got a reaction I bristled at. They didn't exactly pull up their noses, but ornamentals were generally considered relatively unimportant. Especially after being warned in almost every first-year course that food security will be one of the primary issues of our and our children's generation.

The ornamental industry will never feed 9 billion people, so how will our industry gain the interest, passion and dedication without being an obvious choice to gain fulfillment? We industry people know the feeling of fulfillment as our products, the ones we spent so much time and energy on, go out the door to brighten smiles. But those who've never experienced it see only mounds of dirt and hours of hard work.

There's an important word: experience. Even if the college or university is genuinely doing their best, there are only so many courses and only so much hands-on experience they can possibly offer.

For me, it's quite easy to rack up a few years of required experience when applying for either a summer or full-time job after spending nearly every summer in the greenhouse at home. I have it made in the sun: I was born and raised in a greenhouse where you learn to be proud of dirt under your fingernails and green stains on your hands and jeans because it meant work had been done and that was fulfilling. Like Albert mentioned, without experiencing the rewarding returns from a job well done, how can a passion for the industry possibly be cultivated?

Passion for a career doesn't grow on trees. It comes through experience, and may I say, good experiences in the industry of choice.

For someone who's never transplanted a plant in their life, searching for somewhere to find experience and grow a passion for our industry can be very difficult.

Check out any job ad, which will usually run as follows.

• Education: Please have a bachelors or diploma in horticulture or equivalent. (Check.)

• Experience: Minimum 3 years required. (Ah, there's the rub.)

As an industry scrambling for new, interested and dedicated members, taking young people (from high school students to college graduates) under its collective wing can be seen as an investment. And not just hiring them to sweep floors and space pots because let's face it—dust and straight lines are only interesting for maybe half a day.

There are apprentice mechanics, electricians and plumbers where the trade is seen as an art form that can't only be taught in a classroom from a textbook. I think growing should be a trade with apprentice opportunities. Just as Albert stated, "real world" horticulture can be quite a shocker for someone who has spent years learning about plants off of paper. **GT**

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