

GROWERTALKS

Features

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How to Find Them and Keep Them

Jennifer Zurko

As you all know, it's hard to find good help. And when you do, it's even harder to keep them.

I guess you can say hiring good employees is like playing a game of Finders/Keepers, but in this instance, there's no guarantee that you get to keep the awesome worker that you've found.

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According to a study by Pew, Millennials currently make up the largest generation that's in the workforce (35%), with about 56 million of those between ages 21 and 36 working or looking for work. Gen Xers aren't far behind, but Pew said that the Millennials surpassed them for the lion's share of the workforce in 2016.

So when you're looking for new talent, it would make sense to focus on the young professionals who are new to our industry and those who've been meandering their way through their first "real world" jobs for a few years.

There's a perception that Millennials are perpetual job-hoppers, but this isn't necessarily true. Pew also found that Millennials who left a job after 13 months in 2016 (63.4%) were about the same as Gen Xers who did the same thing in 2000 (59.9%). So, if they're happy and feel like they're being challenged in their job, they'll stay—just like every other generation before them.

But they have different expectations when it comes to job satisfaction compared to other generations. Oh, sure, they care about fair pay and a flexible work/life balance like Gen Xers do, but Millennials want to be mentored, and feel supported and appreciated, too—which is much higher on their list than other generations.



With keeping all that in mind, how do you entice young horticulture professionals to come and work for you? And also stay for the long haul? We asked the three finalists for our 2019 *GrowerTalks/Nexus* Young Grower Award this very question.

Up your social media game and online presence, said **Brian Austin**, especially if you're located in a rural area. And any operation that keeps up with the latest technology and automation has a leg up on making young recruits eager to work for you.

Tonya Diehl suggested the way to get young talent into the door is to invite them in ... literally. Having an internship or vocational program for college students ready to enter the workforce is a great way to introduce them to the industry. And you can even start sooner, by hosting field trips and tours for

schools and youth groups. The first time Tonya stepped into a greenhouse, she was hooked, and believes that would work for other young people, too.

And you don't have to look inside of our little bubble—**John Terhesh** said that hiring people from outside of our industry can provide a different and valuable outlook that offer a much-needed, fresh perspective that any business owner could appreciate.

Unfortunately for you, these three dynamos have already found their calling at their respective employers, but you could use their young insight to help you find—and keep—your own Brian or Tonya or John.

Our panel of judges will choose the 2019 *GrowerTalks*/Nexus Young Grower Award winner based on their nomination applications, their essays and a telephone interview. We'd like to thank our esteemed judges for their time and support of this award. This year's judges are:

Anna Ball

President & CEO
Ball Horticultural Company
West Chicago, Illinois

Art Parkerson

Owner
Lancaster Farms
Suffolk, Virginia

Susie Raker-Zimmerman

Vice President
Raker-Roberta's Young Plants
Litchfield, Michigan

Evan Barrington

2018 Young Grower Award Winner
May Nursery, Inc.
Havana, Florida

How do we attract the next generation of horticulture professionals, and once we find them, how do we keep them?



Brian Austin

Age: 33

Title: Head Grower

Operation: Dutch Heritage Gardens, Larkspur, Colorado

It's undeniable that the next generation of horticulture professionals are the future of our industry. The importance of finding them, training them and eventually placing them into positions of leadership is paramount to the future success of the floriculture industry.

Great significance has been placed on finding young professionals as we realize our industry, as a whole, is getting older. At the same time, we're struggling to fill positions. Generational gaps make it harder to understand what attracts younger people and also what motivates them to stick with it. Recognizing opportunities to attract young professionals is the key to overcoming the challenge of finding them. Allowing them to grow and feel valuable once you've found them is the most important aspect of keeping them around for the long haul.

It's important to recognize the need to keep your network current. This means having an up-to-date website, having a social media presence, staying involved in your local community and keeping in contact with universities with horticulture programs. Similar to PGRs being tools to control plant growth, these platforms are tools we can use to expand our company recognition, and ultimately, control the growth of our business.

Many greenhouses like Dutch Heritage Gardens are located in rural areas. Rather than driving out to our physical location or even calling, the quickest and easiest way to learn about our business is through our website and Facebook. A website provides an opportunity to show off any cool technology or production methods. An up-to-date social media presence with current pictures and status updates attracts interest.

Staying involved in the surrounding community through donations makes people talk about our business and gets our name out there. Offering greenhouse tours and field trips will attract young people and spark an interest in horticulture. Outreach programs geared towards talking to the youth about the different parts of horticulture—whether being a teacher, a grower, a breeder or an IT person—advertises the beauty of growing plants and educates on the processes involved.

Staying in touch with universities keeps us in the loop with professional educators and their students who are ready to begin a career in horticulture. We focus on making our business known while educating young people at the same time. We attract young professionals by making it easy to research us through a few clicks of the mouse.

Once young growers are attracted to us online, that's when we can get them in the door. This is the final and greatest opportunity to hire. What attracted me most to Dutch Heritage Gardens was their use of technology and automated equipment. The first tour and interview blew me away and the feeling I came away with was that Dutch Heritage Gardens wants to stay on the cutting edge of growing. That's exactly what my young blood wanted: a company that wasn't content with standing still. They made a focused point of their desire to continue moving forward and needed me to help them keep that mentality. When I left, I was inspired and I couldn't wait to start. I felt valuable and needed from the moment I walked in the door.

Young professionals are excited to contribute right away. Even though training pertaining to your specific company will be needed, it's important to be open to new ideas. It's especially important to highlight opportunities to grow with your company. This lets them know that it isn't another dead-end job, but rather the beginning of a long-term journey.

Develop a culture that shares itself. Keeping a clean office and work area speaks volumes. Being friendly with the staff as you walk through the greenhouse adds to the family feeling that everyone loves. All of these points together add up to a feeling of value and purpose. Those feelings are hard to resist and are what inspire young people to come work with you and not for you.

Finding the next generation of horticulture professionals is the hard part; keeping them once you've found them should be easier, as long as you always cater to the feeling of value. From the beginning, outline a clear path to success within your company. Listen to their goals and place them into responsibilities accordingly. Communicate frequently on how they feel they're aligned with the goals they set and the direction they're moving towards. Give them freedom to explore different options within your company as time allows. Their interest may change as they learn more about your company—a grower may show more interest in production; a sales person may fit better in

logistics. It's easier to keep young professionals if they're enjoy what they're doing and that stems from finding the right fit.

Finally, allow young professionals to grow. Once we hire them, the responsibility for continuing their education falls on those who are already established in the industry. Send them to trade shows and workshops. Introduce them to other growers and vendors, and other leaders in the industry. Let them set up and monitor in-house trials. This last point is critical, as it allows them to explore new ideas and contribute as soon as they see results.

The horticulture field is not all about flowers; it's about people. Young professionals already possess the ingredients for success. Once hired, it's then up to us to nurture and grow that interest into the knowledge it takes to succeed and ultimately make a difference in the industry.

Keep building on that knowledge and moving forward. Keep the feeling of value. Before you know it, they'll be 10-year veterans passing on their knowledge to the next generation. That's how we gain young professionals and keep them contributing to the success of our industry. That's how we keep our industry moving forward.



Tonya Diehl

Age: 30

Title: Lead Assistant Grower

Operation: Sunny Farms, Inc., Sequim, Washington

Can you remember the first time you walked into a greenhouse full of plants? Peak-season, the soft fragrance greeting you ... the sun reflecting every vibrant shade of green, orange, pink, and blue in the fresh foliage and flowers abundantly surrounding you ... the realization that it's possible to grow all of these plants, day to day, as a career.

For me, that first-time tour of a greenhouse in full production was a defining moment—one that set the stage for a career and lifetime pursuit of all things plants, as I know is a common thread linking all of us in horticulture. The passion for what we do in this industry is fundamental to both our ability to succeed, as well as our ability to attract and retain the next generation of horticulture professionals.

Passion is a powerful force, that once directed, can be fuel to drive ambition. Captivating the next generation simply requires igniting that same adoration that originally drew each of us into this exciting career. Growing and producing plants can be a physically demanding job, yet we put our gloves on and dig in because it's so rewarding. We show up every day excited to see what new growth has come, knowing that our actions make a difference.

The plants are tangible proof that we're making something of the time we spend here. Great pride is created in seeing an entire crop that you yourself propagated and cared for go out into the world. It's some sort of magic that we're able to take a seemingly insignificant piece of plant, dip it in rooting hormone, put it in the soil and watch it grow into a whole new plant. I take cuttings regularly and yet I'm astonished every time.

Creating opportunities for those kinds of experiences, the ones where the light bulb first goes on and interest is piqued, will be the compelling force in attracting new, young growers. Possible channels to expose would-be horticulturists can be found in offering field trips and greenhouse tours to schools and youth programs. Reaching out and working with local clubs and organizations provides a chance to involve others in the community. This can be accomplished by being a guest speaker or offering activities and resources like extra plants or pots for projects already in motion. Efforts of contribution that we ardent horticulturists make on a small scale can ripple out to impact

and empower youth in our communities.

Thinking big picture, we can offer more internships or vocational training programs, allowing us to reach a broader audience, while also providing an opportunity for someone to enter the horticulture field without having to choose a traditional four-year degree program. Introducing horticulture to students already in a science field could bring awareness that there's more to choose than just biology or ecology studies. Partnering with related industries like farming, through WWOOF, ATTRA or FFA, could spread awareness of the horticulture industry, allowing another avenue of growing and agriculture.

When The American Society for Horticultural Science held a focus group on the "Importance of Horticulture and Perception as a Career," a main takeaway was found to be that "making people more aware of horticulture itself appears to be the key to growing the profession." By bringing more awareness about greenhouse production and horticulture as an industry and a potential career choice, we can increase the likelihood for that next grower to be inspired to join the field.

In order to retain the next generation of horticulturists, that same conviction that will draw new growers in can also serve to help keep them around. Passion is exciting and contagious; we as facilitators for the next generation must lead by example. By remembering to keep loving what we do, we can bolster the intrinsic motivation inherent to our rich and fulfilling profession. Tapping into that enthusiasm can be a great source for educating others.

Employee development, in the form of training and education, can go a long way in keeping young professionals engaged. Investing in employees in this way shows them that they're valued and appreciated. Actions that sustain employee satisfaction and retention range from something as simple as frequent recognition of a job well done to encouraging personal development through paid time for classes or supporting them to take on new, larger responsibilities.

According to a recent Gallup Poll, "The State of the Global Workplace," 85% of people are dissatisfied and disengaged in their jobs. The report points out that adopting an employee-centered mentality not only improves business performance, but also keeps employees engaged and interested by nourishing intrinsic motivators, such as positive workplace environment and opportunities for personal development. If the managers of today can embody the characteristics of a great leader who appreciates, encourages and invests in their employees, the horticulture professionals of tomorrow will be excited and committed to the industry.

From the moment that I had my first introduction into the world of horticulture, the greenhouse so alive and colorful, I was hooked. Success in attracting the next generation will occur the same way many of us first became attracted to this industry, by igniting that passion for growing.

Through outreach and awareness, it's those of us plant lovers who will continue to inspire the next generation who perhaps haven't yet been introduced. In this profession, the pursuit of knowledge is never ending—that's what makes it so exciting! You could spend your whole career learning plant varieties and cultural requirements, yet still not know it all. This potential for growth, combined with creating a healthy, positive workplace, will help to ensure that we not just retain the next generation of horticulture professionals, but help them to prosper as well.



John Terhesh

Age: 32

Title: Head Grower

Operation: Willoway Nurseries, Inc., Avon, Ohio

“The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago. The second best time is now.”

When I think about the question, “How do we attract the next generation of horticulture professionals?” I always think of this old Chinese proverb. As an industry, I wish we did more to develop the next generation 20 years ago, but it’s not too late. We can start now; the next generation of professionals is patiently waiting and they’re hungry for direction.

One way to develop the next generation is with programs aimed at attracting young people to our industry, such as Seed Your Future. This is a way to reach out to schools to expand students’ knowledge of plants and their understanding of our industry. Programs like this are essential and help students see horticulture as a potential career path. This is a necessary, long-term strategy, and to complement it, we also need a solution we can implement now.

Studies confirm that over 40% of all recent college graduates are underemployed with no career path. This is our industry’s primary solution—attracting the underemployed from other industries, as they provide a limitless amount of untapped potential. These potential employees are looking for a career and would thrive in our industry, but have never been exposed to it. It’s time to drop the three to seven years of horticulture experience from the help-wanted ads and build that experience for them.

Our industry can attract these underemployed individuals by providing job training and career mentorship. Advertising these practices in our help-wanted ads will bring in countless people looking to benefit from our training, but the hiring and training process should always be thought of as a relationship. If one party of the relationship is giving all the effort, the relationship will break down. The employer is providing salary, training and a career path—what can an employee with no horticulture experience possibly be providing for the company?

From my experience hiring outside the industry, new employees have provided us with motivation to learn and improve, out-of-the-box problem solving and fresh perspectives on processes. If embraced and mentored, after a few months we’ll have an engaged, happy, smart employee who’s contributing to the growth of the company. They’ll be working towards their own career goals, as well as the company’s goals—a healthy relationship.

Hiring new employees with a diverse range of backgrounds should be looked at as a strength; we can see value in any number of different backgrounds or studies. For example, art teaches open-mindedness, observational skills and articulating complex thoughts. History teaches looking at past examples of change and assessing conflicting interpretations. These are skills that are valuable at any business, but are easily overlooked in favor of experience. Hiring for attitude and training for skills has given my department better outcomes. u

The encouragement of these new employees has yielded amazing results at our company. From the research and installation of an ECA generator from the waste water treatment industry to the introduction of multiple sensors to gather crop data for better growing decisions, the drive of these new employees is astonishing. They’re constantly looking to make future improvements to our farm or our processes. The phrase, “This is just how we always do it” doesn’t mean much to someone who’s never done it before.

What if we do a lot of training and the employee leaves? Well, what if we don’t do any training and the employee doesn’t leave? It’s in our best interest to develop the next generation of leaders—the more they feel empowered to

succeed, the bigger the impact they'll make to our businesses. The training and the learning are the drives that keep employees engaged at a company. That engagement is what keeps employees trying to do better every day, and their results help not only the company, but the whole industry.

My goal for our training program can be explained simply: We want to train smart, driven individuals who haven't yet found a career path and give them a road map to build a career in the green industry. As opportunities in our companies arise, we want our employees to already have the skills to move into these new positions. This is the biggest improvement we can make in both retention and employee growth. The more time spent mentoring new employees and encouraging them to reach their goals, the faster they're contributing to our own goals.

Implementing a training program doesn't fall on only one person; a level of transparency needs to be implemented across the entire department, involving the entire team. When I first started to develop a training program, I failed miserably. It wasn't until I began talking to the new employees' co-workers about what I was trying to do that I started to have some success. Involving co-workers in interviews, running an on-boarding internship program, making them responsible for the daily training and adding training into their annual reviews was our key to success. Transparency helped me succeed.

Transparency and empowerment are the most prevailing, powerful strategies a company can implement. Sharing our successes and our failures and looking to everyone to assist can help us solve big-picture problems. When our employees are aware of our plans and goals, they can help us succeed. It's amazing how good the results will be after putting these tenets into practice. Whatever problem we're facing, transparency and empowerment will help us fix it.

The next generation of horticulture professionals is dwindling, but the best time to change that is now. By encouraging people from other industries into ours, we can find driven individuals, build their experience and develop them into the knowledgeable, experienced professionals we need. Let's discover the next generation, empower them and watch them do amazing things. **GT**