

GROWERTALKS

GT in Brief

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HRI Leadership Academy Announces 2025 Class Members

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The Horticultural Research Institute (HRI) announced 11 new class members for the 2025 HRI Leadership Academy. The class was officially introduced at Cultivate'24.

This will be the third class to complete the nearly year-long program, which is designed to develop leaders on all levels of the green industry. Program participants will grow personally and professionally through leadership and business skill training, engagement with the green industry network, and through completion of a real-world project.

The 2025 Class Members are:

Christopher Brown Jr.—A second-generation nurseryman and Virginia-certified horticulturist, Christopher has actively contributed to the industry through his involvement with the Virginia Nursery and Landscape Association (VNLA), the VNLA research foundation, and the International Plant Propagators Society (IPPS).

Crystal Cady—Crystal is a dedicated horticulture professional with over 25 years of experience, including owning her own grower-retailer business. Currently, she serves as CEO-Designate for the Northwest Nursery Buyers Association, set to assume the CEO role on January 1, 2025. Crystal has worked for the Oregon Association of Nurseries and actively volunteers on the Farwest Show committee, among other volunteer roles within and beyond the green industry.

Pablo Costa—A native of Chile, Pablo grew up on a cherry farm and has dedicated his horticulture career to continuous improvement and operational efficiency. As the Director of Operations and Growing for Van Belle Nursery Finished Plants in British Columbia, he oversees teams managing everything from growing to shipping.

Mason Day—Growing up in a quaint Michigan town, Mason's roots in horticulture run deep, cultivated through years at his family's retail greenhouse. He launched a tech-driven venture, Grow It, and is currently Director of Growth and Development at JR Peters Inc. Actively contributing to the industry, he co-chairs the National Initiative for Consumer Horticulture (NICH), serves on America in Bloom's board and has served on the AmericanHort Generation Next community.

Bob Dickman—A fifth-generation leader of Dickman Farms, Bob cultivated his work ethic from an early age on the family farm. After graduating high school, he enlisted in the Marines, where he excelled, earning honors in boot camp and infantry school, and leading numerous missions as a squad leader. This military background shapes his leadership as the general manager of an expansive 18-acre greenhouse operation with over 100 employees. Bob's commitment to the industry extends through his past role as an AmericanHort board member and his current

involvement in the AmericanHort Greenhouse community connectors.

Aaron Dillon—Vice President and General Manager at Four Winds Growers, Aaron is a fourth-generation citrus nurseryman from California who's actively involved in both his industry and community. He's served as president of the California Citrus Nursery Society and has held positions on the California Citrus Nursery Board, Plant California Alliance, and numerous other committees and organizations.

Jesse Eastman—Jesse leads Fort Collins Nursery, where he's worked for over 25 years. Since taking over from his father, he's restructured the management team to boost efficiency and profitability. The nursery has significantly expanded in sales, employees and production acres. A Colorado Certified Nursery Professional, Jesse has held leadership roles with Friends and Gardens on Spring Creek, the Colorado Nursery and Greenhouse Association, and the Garden Centers of Colorado boards.

Sonya Westervelt—The Chief of Wholesale Sales at Saunders Brothers Inc., Sonya drives growth through forward-thinking collaboration. Recognized for her achievements, she received the Young Professional of the Year awards from the Virginia Nursery and Landscape Association (VNLA) and the Southern Nursery Association (SNA) in 2017, and has earned the Outstanding Recent Alumna award from Virginia Tech University. She's also actively engaged in various committees and associations, including VNLA, the Delaware Center for Horticulture and the Virginia Tech Alumni Association.

Paul Vaandrager—Paul is an experienced Canadian Nursery and Greenhouse Certification Manager, who currently serves as the Supply Chain Manager at Qualitree Propagators, Inc. With LEAN certification in both green and yellow belts, Paul commits to continuous development.

Deanna van Klaveren—As the Chief Operations Officer and co-owner of Generation Growers, Inc., Deanna excels in developing organizational processes and training staff. For over 30 years, she's significantly contributed to the green industry through her involvement with the California Association of Nurseries and Garden Centers (CANGC, now Plant Alliance) and the California Agriculture Leadership Foundation (CALF). An alumna of the California Agriculture Leadership Program, she's been honored with the CALF Profiles in Leadership Award, the CANGC Young Nursery Professional of the Year Award, and the CANGC Ron Regan Education and Career Award.

Chris Wichman—Chris is the Production Manager at Belmont Nursery, a 20-acre growing facility and garden retail operation. Chris is actively involved in the industry, contributing to the county and state Farm Bureau, the California Water Institute, the Center for Irrigation Technology and the International Plant Propagators Society (IPPS).

"Effective leadership and continuous development are essential for the success of green industry businesses," said Ken Fisher, AmericanHort President and CEO. "We are impressed with the quality of the class members and are excited to support their growth as leaders within their companies, communities, and our industry. The HRI Leadership Academy represents a significant investment in the future of our industry."

The curriculum is designed specifically to meet industry needs and is organized to include Strategy, Leadership and People Management, Numbers and Advocacy, and the Value Chain. Course principles are put to practical application through a course-long leadership project, which will be presented at Cultivate'25 being held July 12-15, 2025.

For more information and to download an informational brochure on the HRI Leadership Academy, go to HRILeadershipAcademy.org or contact Jennifer Gray at JenniferG@AmericanHort.org or (614) 487-1117. **GT**