GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Production

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The Career I Thought I'd Never Choose

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When I was 18, I hopped over the ocean and worked at a tulip operation in the Netherlands for three months. It was meant to be home base for a stretch of European travel I'd planned. I was looking forward to learning more, but didn't quite know what to expect. At the time, my horticulture experience was limited to a rather sad, failed herb garden on my back patio. Once I landed among the Dutch, I jumped into the work and found myself in the middle of a seasoned crew of Polish workers. My days were spent lancing bulbs into spiked growing crates, walking fields to deadhead flowers and picking forced tulips in the greenhouse. It was repetitive and physically demanding work. After the first week, I remember thinking one thing with absolution: My long-term career was never going to be in horticulture. (Ha!)

At the time, that version of horticulture (sore back, poked fingers and long days) felt like the full extent of the picture. I didn't yet understand how broad the industry really was or how many different paths existed beyond general production labor.

That gap in awareness is exactly what initiatives like Green Career Week aim to address. Fast forward to present day, it's something I'm stoked to participate in every year. Led by Seed Your Future, Green Career Week focuses on connecting students with awareness and opportunities across the horticulture sector. The goal is to highlight the wide range of roles available and to give students a firsthand look at what those careers actually involve.

For us, it's also a good excuse to briefly pause from the day-to-day demands of production and invite others into our world. Over the course of Green Career Week (it actually ended up being two!), we invited groups from local middle schools, high schools and universities. It was easy to point out and describe the labor processes taking place around the greenhouse and, of course, we nerd out about growing while staring at acres of plants. But we also highlighted the roles that work more behind the scenes to keep things moving every day. We walked through the planning that happens long before propagation is ever started. We talked about marketing and sales, traveling and building relationships. Maintenance teams ensure equipment and sensors are ticking along. HR tackles recruitment and training. Logistics and shipping teams keep product flowing out the door on time. These aren't the most visible or obvious parts of horticulture, but they're rewarding paths.

We expanded the conversation beyond the nursery before us, as well. Suppliers for soil, fertilizers, crop protection, technology and robotics are all part of the job landscape. For those interested in sciences, these areas offer

opportunities to find a satisfying spot within the industry. There's even agriculture finances! I love sharing this story about my Dad's career path. He worked as a livestock feed salesman for 12 years before a well-known bank reached out to recruit him. They would train him to be a banker, valuing his existing knowledge and experience in agriculture. This way, he could connect specifically and organically with the agribusiness community regarding their financial needs. (To me, it reads very "Armageddon.")

Engagement in the tours is different with students from different grade levels. Middle schoolers tend to take in the experience in broad strokes. They absorb the scale of the nursery and the buzz of production. High school students begin connecting classroom concepts to real-world applications, particularly those in high schools with dedicated agriculture electives. University students—often already considering job placement—showed greater interest in job opportunities and professional development.

Across all groups, we try to keep the message consistent: Horticulture offers meaningful careers that contribute to food systems, environmental sustainability and community well-being. It's an industry where you can use your hands, your mind and your creativity all at once. Whether you prefer hands-on work or analytical problem-solving, there's a place for you in this field.

As an industry, we face the challenge of attracting and retaining skilled talent. Events like Green Career Week are a reminder that the interest can be there—we just need to nurture it. By opening our doors and sharing our own stories, these young adults can perhaps see themselves in our shoes someday. Those who walked through our nursery could very well be tomorrow's growers, researchers, innovators and leaders.

In a sweet way, it reminds me about my first experiences in the tulips. And, if even a handful of these students left the nursery thinking, "I could see myself doing this," then Green Career Week was a success. **GT**

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