

GROWERTALKS

Guest Column

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Growing the Next Generation Starts With Awareness

Broch Martindale



"I had no idea horticulture offered so many different careers."

It wasn't a student who said that. It was one of the teachers.

She smiled as she reflected on the week, almost in disbelief. We'd spent several days visiting growers, breeders, distributors and industry leaders, and the picture had become much bigger. She'd always known horticulture as a subject to teach; now she saw an industry filled with scientists, engineers, marketers, production specialists, logistics professionals, sales leaders and entrepreneurs all connected by

a common purpose.

At that moment, one thing became crystal clear: Our workforce challenge isn't primarily a talent problem. It's an awareness problem.

Every year, Seed Your Future's Seed to STEM program brings horticulture and agriculture educators from across the country together to experience our industry firsthand. This year's cohort visited Longwood Gardens, Lucas Greenhouses, Overdevest Nurseries, DVFlora and North Creek Nurseries, meeting the people who grow plants, develop new genetics, manage production, solve complex challenges and lead thriving businesses.

What they discovered wasn't a new industry; it was a broader understanding of an industry they already cared deeply about.

One of the greatest misconceptions about horticulture is that careers begin and end in the greenhouse. The reality couldn't be more different. During the week, teachers saw careers requiring creativity, technology, business acumen, communications and leadership—all united by a shared passion for growing.

Perhaps even more important than what they experienced was what they'll do next.

These educators didn't simply tour exceptional facilities; they're returning home to develop classroom lessons and curriculum inspired by what they learned. Those resources will be shared with educators across the country,

multiplying the impact well beyond the classrooms represented during the week.

One inspired teacher can influence hundreds of students each year—30 inspired teachers can influence thousands. Imagine the impact as those students carry that awareness into classrooms, campuses and careers across the country.

As I traveled alongside this group, another thought kept surfacing. The companies opening their doors weren't simply showcasing beautiful facilities; they were investing in their own future workforce.



Every grower who hosted a tour, every employee who answered questions and every company that committed time and resources wasn't just supporting an educational program. They were helping shape the next generation of growers, researchers, production managers, engineers, sales professionals, marketers, business leaders and entrepreneurs who'll one day move this industry forward.

That kind of investment takes vision. The best leaders don't simply solve today's problems. They create opportunities that outlast them. They invest in people

long before there's an immediate return. That's exactly what I saw throughout Seed to STEM.

Our industry is filled with leaders who understand that sharing knowledge isn't giving something away—it's building something bigger. They recognize that opening their doors today may inspire a student who joins their team five or 10 years from now. More importantly, it strengthens horticulture as a whole.

That spirit of collaboration is one of the things that makes this industry so special. Companies compete in the marketplace, yet willingly come together to support education, workforce development and the future of horticulture. Everyone understands that attracting more talented people into our profession benefits all of us.

No single company can solve the workforce challenge alone. No single organization can either. But together, we can fundamentally change how students, and the educators who influence them, see the opportunities our industry offers.

As I watched teachers ask questions, take notes and build relationships with professionals across every segment of horticulture, it became clear that something much larger was happening than a series of facility tours. Perspectives were expanding. Connections were being built. Confidence was growing.

These educators weren't simply learning about horticulture—they were becoming ambassadors for it.

Every lesson they teach, every career conversation they have and every student they encourage has the potential to introduce someone to an industry they may have never discovered otherwise.

I've spent my career believing that horticulture changes lives. This week reminded me that before we can change a student's future, we first have to expand what they know is possible.

As Board Chair of Seed Your Future, I have the privilege of witnessing incredible collaboration across our industry. Growers, breeders, suppliers, educators, researchers and association leaders continue to come together with a shared belief that our future depends on inspiring the next generation.

I've never been more optimistic, not because the workforce challenge is behind us, but because I've seen firsthand what happens when passionate people choose to invest in others.

The opportunity is in front of us. Every greenhouse tour. Every classroom visit. Every internship. Every conversation with a student or educator is an opportunity to introduce someone to a career they may have never imagined.

Growing the next generation doesn't begin when someone accepts their first job in horticulture. It begins the moment they discover the opportunity exists.

Every one of us has a story about how we found horticulture. The next generation is waiting for someone to help them discover theirs. That's why growing the next generation starts with awareness. **GT**

Broch Martindale is Board Chair for Seed Your Future.