

AHS MEMBERS MAKING A DIFFERENCE: Susan Yoder

by Stephanie George



Aspiring horticulturists participate in hands-on activities such as thinning tomato seedlings during a Seed Your Future-sponsored event at North Carolina State University in Raleigh.

PEOPLE WHO work with plants tend to be pretty passionate about their jobs, but putting the idea of a career involving horticulture in people's minds in the first place can be quite challenging. This is reflected in the fact that around 40 percent of currently available horticulture positions remain unfilled.

"There's a huge demand that's just not being met," says Susan Yoder, executive director of Seed Your Future, a national organization that promotes horticulture as a career. There simply aren't enough people, she explains, who can grow food, conserve plant species, and create engaging green spaces. "The bottom line is that in this changing world we've got to have people who can ensure the future of our environment," says Yoder, an American Horticultural Society (AHS) member who lives in Indianapolis, Indiana.

SPREADING THE WORD

Some of the problem appears to stem from a lack of awareness about the opportunities in horticulture. According to a phone

survey carried out by Seed Your Future in 2016, just 48 percent of Americans between the ages of 18 and 35 are familiar with the term "horticulture," while about 72 percent of those over 35 are more likely to recognize the word. Among the respondents who were familiar with horticulture, only 26 percent saw it as a viable, fulfilling, and respected career path.



Susan Yoder

Reflecting on her own career path, Yoder says that it was influenced by her affinity for the outdoors and shaped with the help of people who encouraged her to pave her own way. She started out sharing her love of nature with kids at the camps and after school programs where she worked. "After college," she says, "I discovered that a career in nonprofit

management blended my commitment to youth development with organizations focused on causes I cared about."

Yoder is also a longtime home gardener who is particularly fond of native plants and edibles. When she joined Seed Your Future last summer, her passion for working with youth and her interest in gardening finally merged. One of the parts of her job she enjoys most is crisscrossing the country promoting the goals of Seed Your Future.

Among Yoder's recent stops was the AHS's National Children & Youth Garden Symposium in the Pacific Northwest this past summer. In her presentation there to teachers, garden designers, and others that work with school-aged kids, she emphasized the importance of letting their young audiences know that horticultural jobs are an option. "What we hear from talking to kids is that they are actually thinking a lot about what kind of job they want," says Yoder. "They say they want to make a difference, be creative, and have flexibility—all things careers in horticulture can offer."

A TEAM EFFORT

In addition to reaching out to educators and others who guide career-seekers, Seed Your Future encourages those already working in the field to use the hashtag #ILoveMyPlantJob on social media. This campaign is helping to change the "pervasive negative perception of horticulture jobs," Yoder says. A glance through a few of these tagged images yields smiling faces in settings from fields and greenhouses to laboratories and classrooms. "When kids see people loving what they do for a living, it helps open their minds to considering those careers," Yoder says.

Yoder feels optimistic about the collective impact her work is having. "Attitudes towards gardening and other plant-related professions are changing, and it's exciting to work with organizations like Seed Your Future and the AHS that are leading the way," Yoder says.

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