

By: Allan Armitage
allan@greenhousegrower.com



The Kew Gardens Of The North

I am writing this column from Ontario, Canada, where I have taken a desk at the Niagara School of Horticulture (www.schoolofhorticulture.com) in Niagara Falls. I wanted to see a different perspective of horticulture education and so I cleverly talked the superintendent, Liz Klose, into inviting me for a sabbatical at the school during the summer of 2007. Established in 1936, the program was originally known as The Training School for Apprentice Gardeners, based on the long-standing gardener apprenticeship offered at the Royal Botanic Gardens in Kew, England. The name was changed to Niagara Parks Commission School of Horticulture in 1959.



Students balance classroom work with plant identification and tree maintenance work.

The three-year program is intense and difficult to get into. Applicants are filtered based on academic criteria, written evaluations and live interviews. After the dust has settled, only 12 to 14 students are selected each year. However, the training these students receive is unique compared to the two- and four-year schools most of us are used to. Not only do they have a rigorous academic schedule, they are also in charge of all aspects of running the 100-acre Niagara Parks Botanical Garden. The Botanical Garden is visited by about 1.2 million people annually, so it must always be at its best. The gardens display great diversity in plant materials such as the newest in annuals and perennials, roses, herbs, vegetables, arboretum and hedging materials. The botanical garden is their outdoor classroom, and skills in greenhouse production, nursery management, IPM, design and plant identification are put into practice immediately.

The three-year program runs for 36 consecutive months.

During each summer, students translate the procedures taught by the staff and spend eight hours a day, at least five days a week, putting them into practice. They balance that with outdoor classes in plant identification, surveying and tree maintenance. The practical program is much reduced in the fall and winter to provide time for classroom endeavors.

It has been an interesting education on my part to see how the quality of student here compares to those I have dealt with in four-year programs in the United States and Canada. The small number of students essentially guarantees competition for entrance, so the students are academically prepared to enter the school as any others. However, all the students have already decided that this is the career they want to grow old with, as opposed to many four-year colleges and universities where the first two years are spent trying to figure that out.

Most of my students at Georgia, and in most four-year horticulture programs, don't enter horticulture in a serious way until their third year. The maturity level is equal or higher here (not to say they don't enjoy their parties just as much), but since the career choice has been made, they are very serious about their school time.

I am also highly impressed by the way these students



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are taught to handle responsibility. The staff breaks the students into teams in charge of various aspects of the grounds. Each team has a student leader who must be sure the work is done correctly, and he or she must give a report to staff and students once a week. Teams change as do leaders, but the responsibility does not. One student also acts as the general supervisor over the entire body and must act as boss and manager. Without doubt, this is a great skill for

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the future, where responsibility is a necessary ingredient for success. We do not do nearly as good a job in most four-year programs.

Basic courses of English, math, history and social studies are not as rigorous as in four-year institutes, as most time is focused on core horticulture and landscaping courses. Due to the practical program, there are fewer classroom hours than normally found in four-year schools. However, students rotate through the greenhouses, the irrigation crews and the IPM crews so they learn a good deal by doing. They also take formal courses in standard offerings like botany, greenhouse management, entomology, pathology, landscape design, turf grass, propagation, plant ID etc. Their time on the grounds plus time in the classroom essentially means being "in class" 40 hours a week.

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The internship program is well developed, this year entertaining interns from France, Germany and Ireland. Next year they will certainly have some from the University of Georgia. Students also take a trip overseas to see horticulture elsewhere. This year, the third-year students went to England, Holland and France.

I suppose the proof is the pudding, that is, how do the students do once

they leave this place? I doubt many will go on for a Ph.D., nor will many be involved in marketing or advertising. The reputation of the school and its unique program is well known in Canada and there seems to be little difficulty in finding employment at reasonable salaries. As the alumni book on "who's who" demonstrates, they are owners and presidents of successful



businesses, garden personalities and even in charge of field operations of a major league baseball team.

I have met many alumni, and every one feels they had the best education of anyone they know. I would suggest that human resources people take a close look at these students for internships and possible employment. After all, it

is industry accredited as the first Canadian college to receive the equivalency of a four-year Bachelor's Degree status by the Professional Landcare Network (PLANET).

There are many ways to approach horticulture education. The Niagara School of Horticulture is surely different, and that is good. As for me, I am doing a little teaching, a little writing and a little

mentoring. I have done lots of the first two but never thought of myself as a mentoring kind of fellow. I must say I rather enjoy it; maybe I can get a job as Head Mentor somewhere when I retire. Maybe here. **GG**

About the author: Allan Armitage is a professor, Department of Horticulture, University of Georgia, Athens, Ga. You can e-mail him at allan@greenhousegrower.com.