

# Survey finds horticulture grads prepared for green jobs

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Iowa State horticulture students collaborate to install a new landscape planting.  
Credit: Photo by Mike Reinert

Professors Ann Marie VanDerZanden and Michael Reinert of Iowa State University (ISU) wanted to find out how their recent Department of Horticulture graduates were faring in the workplace. To learn more about their former students' job performance, the pair designed a 70-question survey and distributed it to employers who hired recent ISU horticulture graduates.

"The purpose of this study", explained the team "was to evaluate the attitudes and perceptions of employers who have recently hired ISU Department of Horticulture graduates in regard to the graduates' preparedness when entering the workforce and their abilities to complete

job responsibilities."

Most of the survey questions were directly related to expected learner outcomes from the undergraduate curriculum. These outcomes related to abilities in professional skills and general horticulture; 24 of the survey questions asked employers to rank the importance of skills in the areas of general horticulture and business. Another set of questions asked employers to rank the importance of work experience, attitude, and job preparedness. The survey response rate from employers was 45.8%.

The survey also covered areas including minimum education requirements, preparedness for the position, the five best traits of a college graduate employee, the five worst traits of a college graduate employee, and top business skills.

Results showed that 52.5% of employers felt graduates were "more than adequately" to "exceptionally well" prepared for the position for which they were hired, and another 42.5% felt students were "adequately" prepared. Employers ranked graduates' abilities in general horticulture (4.22) and professional skills (4.24) as "good" to "excellent" on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = very poor to 5 = excellent). In the group of questions related to [work experience](#), attitude, and job preparedness, employers ranked "good work ethic" as the most important skill, with a score of 4.97.

Strong personal skills were listed overwhelmingly as the most important, followed by science and industry skills and other skills. The personal skills-type responses were coded into subcategories with work ethic, initiative, people skills, communication skills, and organization skills being mentioned most often and totaling 66% of the answers.

"Employers are looking for solid technical skills, but they also want more personal skills such as communication, professionalism, teamwork, and management skills. Some of the skills most desired, such as a good

work ethic and initiative, are also some of the most difficult to teach at the collegiate level", the study reported.

According to VanDerZanden and Reinert, preparing students to succeed in the diverse field of horticulture requires coursework across a range of disciplines, including the plant and soil sciences, disease and insect management, as well as general courses in communications and business. They added that "shrinking budgets, departmental reorganization and consolidation, and adjustments to national trends are forcing many 4-year horticulture programs to reevaluate curricula and programs."

This study was the first employer satisfaction survey done by the ISU Department of [Horticulture](#). Findings from the survey will be combined with results from two other recent surveys and used as part of the ongoing undergraduate program assessment conducted by the department. "The study results will be used to make adjustments to curriculum and learner outcomes to enhance student learning and better prepare graduates for employment in the green industry", noted VanDerZanden.

More information: The complete study and abstract are available on the ASHS HortTechnology electronic journal web site:  
[horttech.ashspublications.org/ ... nt/abstract/19/3/647](http://horttech.ashspublications.org/...nt/abstract/19/3/647)

Source: American Society for Horticultural Science

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