

Why work in horticulture?

Mike Finlayson¹

Almost everywhere, it seems people consider there is a crisis looming in horticulture, with fewer young people becoming growers to ultimately replace those already in the industry. And yet there has been a quiet revolution going on in industry training over the past decade that has seen the numbers of people involved in training rocket to levels never witnessed before. So what's going on? Who is right, and who is wrong?

The Horticulture Industry Training Organisation (ITO) was established in 1993 to administer apprenticeship and cadetship-type training in the industry. The ITO replaced the Horticulture and Amenity Turf Management Trade Certificate programmes administered by the Trade Certification Board; a range of programmes offered by RNZIH, e.g. the National Diploma in Horticulture, the National Certificate in Horticulture and the Certificate in Horticultural Practice (for fruit and vegetable cadets); and a range of certificates e.g. the Certificate in Groundsmanship, the Certificate in Arboriculture and the Certificate in Landscape Construction administered by the Local Government Training Board.

At the time of the changeover, the ITO inherited around 230 apprentices/cadets, this being 1.2%

of the total number of people involved in industry training throughout New Zealand at that time. As at 30 September 2002 there were 1,000 trainees actively involved in horticultural training, which, interestingly, is 1.2% of the 78,240 people now involved in industry training throughout New Zealand. So not only has there been greater than a four-fold increase in the numbers of people currently training in horticulture compared to numbers trained in 1993, but the increase is consistent with what is happening in other industries involved in training.

Across the entire horticultural industry, one in eight employers have staff involved in training. The amenity sector has one employer in every two employers with staff involved in training. The ratio for the nursery sector is 1:4, the fruit sector 1:10, the plant and garden centre retail sector 1:12, the floriculture sector 1:29, and the vegetable production sector 1:44.

From 1993 to 2002, more than 3,200 people have participated in horticultural industry training, with 339 people graduating with a National Certificate in Horticulture at Level 4 (the equivalent of the old Trade Certificate qualification). These numbers do not include the hundreds of graduates of polytechnic horticultural programmes, those from

university programmes, and those from the private training providers. So what's the fuss all about? The industry is training at a level never seen before.

2001 Census data provide an insight into why people perceive there to be a skills shortage in horticulture. 50% of the horticultural workforce earns less than \$20,000 a year. 84% of the horticultural workforce earns less than \$40,000 per year. As one prospective trainee said recently "Why would you want to work in horticulture for \$8 an hour when you can get \$12 an hour making Big Macs at McDonald's?" This is one of the fundamental reasons why people believe there to be a skills shortage in the horticulture industry. Very few people these days are prepared to work for as little as \$8 an hour. If an employer cannot find someone who will, the immediate reaction is to perceive there to be a skills shortage in the industry.

The shortage at the blue collar level is definitely more real than perceived. Only 10% of all the people who have gone through the ITO's training programmes since 1993 have graduated with a National Certificate. Much of the reason for this is poor recruitment, and this again is tied in with abysmal wages. 2001 Census data show that 27.8% of the

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horticultural workforce hold no secondary school qualification, and 17.9% hold only School Certificate. These statistics are mirrored in those of our industry trainees. It would appear that these are the only people who are prepared to work for \$8 an hour. While the industry will always need pickers and sorters and packers and gardeners, if you are trying to fill a skills shortage at the blue collar level you need to recruit people who are capable of seeing through a 3-year apprenticeship, and then going on to become managers and supervisors.

But there is more to filling a skills shortage than just recruiting well. It requires employers to develop a training culture in the workplace, where learning is afforded some respect. It requires employers to establish a career pathway within their own organisations in order to retain staff after the training has

finished, and to further maximise the return on training investment. And it requires committed industry leaders to take responsibility for the future of their sector by taking on an apprentice and passing on their knowledge. Too many employers expect to get staff off the supermarket shelf rather than training staff themselves. Much of that attitude stems from the belief that investing in training staff provides no return. That is simply not the case. Research has shown that a well designed and delivered training programme can expect to generate significant financial returns that compare more than favourably with other forms of investment.

New products and services available through the Horticulture ITO

Over the past 12 months a number of new and revised products and

services have become available through the NZ Horticulture ITO. They include:

1. Recognition of Prior Learning
2. Accelerated assessment
3. Cross crediting
4. Modern Apprenticeships in Horticulture
5. National Diploma in Horticulture (Level 6)
6. National Certificate in Horticulture (Arboriculture)

Mike Finlayson has worked in horticultural education for the past 15 years, following 13 years as a practitioner in the sports turf industry. He was a turf management lecturer in the polytechnic system for nine years, and CEO for the Sports Turf ITO for five years. Mike holds a Masters degree in Plant Protection from Lincoln University, and a Diploma in Rural Studies from Massey University.

For more details on any of these products and services contact your nearest Regional Manager.

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