

# Students shown ag career path

U. of G. staff used some interactive sessions to show students different options in plant agriculture

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Ontario Farmer

Students from seven high schools across southwestern Ontario met at the University of Guelph last week to learn about options in plant agriculture.

College and university-bound students were invited to discover career and educational opportunities while participating in interactive sessions designed to help them earn certificates for their Specialist High Skills Major (SHSM).

Most of the students who attended are involved in SHSM programs, like landscaping and horticulture. Through a series of sessions that were both lecture-style and hands-on, students learned about careers related to agriculture, horticulture, and plant science.

Approximately 125 students from Toronto, Oakville, Centre Wellington, Kitchener-Waterloo, Cambridge and Grey-Huron County attended the event.

"We hope to spark the imagination as to what's available with respect to agriculture and food and applied plant sciences," says Rene Van Acker, Plant Agriculture professor and Associate Dean External Relations, Ontario Agricultural College.

"One of the reasons we're so keen to have you here is because we need you here," he told the crowd. "This is an exciting time for you because things in this sector are just exploding."

During the morning's opening address, Van Acker shared the wealth of opportunity open to students in the plant agriculture sector. Agriculture, he says, is a \$10-billion sector in Ontario. And the food sector generates approximately \$40-billion.

"We have programs that are relevant to Ontario's largest economic and job sector," says Van Acker. "We are relevant to a very large and growing sector that extends far beyond production agriculture."

"Our relationship with food and agriculture is very different now," he continues. "It's an era that you can put your stamp on."

Peter Pauls, University of Guelph professor and Department of Plant Agriculture



Flesherton, ON high school students Montana Chordis (left) and Bethany Gordon (right) work on identifying a plant in Rodger Tschanz's Plant Identification session.

Chair, highlighted some of the interesting work done at the institution. The Guelph Turfgrass Institute, for instance, addresses water and pest issues in turf used for lawns, golf courses and soccer fields, he says.

For those interested in environmental studies, the Gosling Research Institute for Plant Preservation (GRIPP) conducts research in areas of environmental concern. For instance, the institution is currently working on preserving the elm tree, which has been devastated by disease.

Finally, Pauls mentions the Bioproduct Discovery and Development Centre, where researchers look at plants used for biofuels discovery and development, among other things.

Students were asked to choose two of five certification and training sessions offered. Topics included Weed Identification with Francois Tardif, Plant Identification with Rodger Tschanz, Grading and Sodding with Eric Lyons, Tree Planting/Plant Layout with Steve Fleischauer, and Plant DNA with Peter Pauls.

"The purpose of the event was to give them as much of an intro to their area of training as possible," says OAC Liaison, Karen Nelson. "They need to take these to graduate. That's why it appeals to SHSM students, but anyone is welcome to take it."

When it comes to choosing a program or area of study, plant agriculture is often the hardest sell, says Nelson.

"It doesn't really sound sexy. No one in school knows what it is," she says. "But when they get here they realize it's pretty cool."

This is the first time that OAC has offered certification for SHSM students.

"Teachers have been asking for this for a while, so this is in response to that," says Nelson.

Nelson says a trip to the university is a unique opportunity for students, since it offers a variety of information on academic, employment and research opportunities.

Bethany Gordon, a grade 10-student from Grey Highlands Secondary School in Flesherton, says she's thinking of studying plant agriculture or horticulture when she goes to university.

"There are lots of jobs available, and I really like the sciences," she says. Although she's always been interested in plants, she says there's a lot more to learn at events like these.

Montana Chordis, a grade 12-student, also from Grey Highlands Secondary School, wants to do something in landscaping and design. Her SHSM offers her experience in landscaping, machinery, cutting flowers, safety, pruning and greenhouse operations.

She attended the session as part of the certification process for her SHSM, but also because she wanted to learn more about plants.

"I've learned quite a lot today," she says. Her personal highlight was the plant identification session where she learned how to identify plants through smell, texture, size, shape and colour.

"After today's visit," she says, "I'm considering Guelph as a possibility."

Similar events are hosted by the University of Guelph and OAC throughout the year.



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