



# The next generation

Plants may be the product, but people keep the horticulture industry running. OAN FILE PHOTO

## Powering the workforce pipeline through the HRI Scholarship Program

BY JENNIFER GRAY

**A**s experienced growers retire and operations grow more complex, horticulture businesses are asking a critical question.

Who is coming next?

Plants may be the product, but people are the engine of the horticulture industry. From nursery and greenhouse production to landscape design, and plant breeding to plant health, businesses across the green industry depend on skilled, well-trained professionals. As workforce shortages and operational demands grow, building and sustaining a dependable pipeline of industry-ready talent is a top priority.

### Investment in the future workforce

The Horticultural Research Institute (HRI) Scholarship Program makes a deliberate investment in that pipeline. During the 2025–2026 academic year, HRI awarded \$62,000 in scholarship support to 18 stu-

dents pursuing horticulture-related degrees at institutions across the country. These scholarships, funded by generous donors, are not simply financial aid; they represent a commitment to build industry infrastructure through investments in the people who will make up the green industry in the years ahead.

### Scholarships built for industry careers

The HRI Scholarship Program is intentionally designed to empower students pursuing careers in the green industry. That includes students like Ella May, recipient of the Timothy S. and Palmer W. Bigelow, Jr. Scholarship, who is preparing for a career in greenhouse production, with a focus on science-based growing practices that improve efficiency and plant performance.

Others, such as Landon Erbrick, recipient of the Dennis & Harriet Walters Memorial Scholarship, are pursuing advanced horticulture degrees with plans to work in commercial greenhouse and nursery operations where they'll bring technical expertise and management skills directly into production environments.

For James Hines IV, recipient of the

John B. & Elizabeth Wight Memorial Scholarship and a first-year horticulture student at Tennessee Tech, education is directly tied to succession planning. "My goal is to honor my family's legacy by modernizing our business practices and introducing more sustainable solutions for the future," he writes, reflecting the commitment many scholarship recipients bring to strengthening family-owned nursery businesses.

Students pursuing business and market-facing roles are also represented. Paul Crocker, recipient of the Susie & Bruce Usrey Education Scholarship, is preparing for a career in horticultural sales, marketing, and business development, areas that are increasingly critical as companies compete for customers and talent alike.

### Reflecting the scope of the industry

The HRI Scholarship Program is supported by a portfolio of endowed funds, each reflecting different priorities within the horticulture industry. Scholarships such as the Carville M. Akehurst Memorial Scholarship, the Bryan A. Champion Memorial Scholarship, the Gunter Mecking Memorial Scholarship, and the Spring Meadow – Proven Winners ➤

## The next generation

Scholarship collectively support students across production, plant science, landscape architecture, and business disciplines.

This year's Spring Meadow – Proven Winners Scholarship recipients, for example, include students pursuing woody plant production and plant breeding and improvement, fields that directly influence product quality, availability, and market success. These disciplines play a critical role in helping green industry businesses meet customer demand while adapting to changing production and market conditions.

For Katelyn Boyce, recipient of the Bryan A. Champion Memorial Scholarship and a graduate student in plant breeding at The Ohio State University, that intersection of innovation and application is central to her career goals.

"I'm deeply committed to horticulture because I see it as both an art and a science—one that brings joy to people while also addressing larger environmental concerns," she explains, reflecting the blend of technical expertise and industry awareness that defines many HRI scholars.

### Attracting talent to the industry

For students deciding where to commit their time and energy, scholarships send a simple, important message: the horticulture industry wants you. The HRI Scholarship Program reinforces horticulture as a viable, long-term career path by showing students that industry leaders are willing to invest in their success. That early signal plays a real role in attracting talent and keeping it pointed toward careers in horticulture.

By easing financial pressure, HRI scholarships allow students to focus on learning, skill development, and career preparation, ensuring they enter the workforce ready to contribute, rather than simply credentialed. For businesses, that translates into graduates who understand industry expectations and are prepared to step into operational roles with confidence.

### Building the future, together

The growth of the HRI Scholarship Program reflects a shared belief among donors



This year's HRI scholarships included students pursuing woody plant production and plant breeding, fields that influence product quality, availability and market success. OAN FILE PHOTO

that workforce development is essential to the industry's future. Reaching \$62,000 in scholarship support this year marks an important milestone; one only made possible by the individuals, families, and companies who believe in investing in people.

The 2025–2026 HRI Scholarship Program recipients represent the next generation of growers, managers, designers, and business professionals who will help shape horticulture in the years ahead. As workforce demands continue to evolve, sustained investment in emerging professionals will remain essential to the industry's long-term competitiveness and growth.

For more information, visit [HRIResearch.org](https://HRIResearch.org). ©

*Jennifer Gray is Administrator for the Horticultural Research Institute (HRI), where she leads industry-driven research and workforce development initiatives that connect science with practical industry impact.*

## 2025–2026 HRI Scholarship Program recipients

Each scholarship fund represents more than generosity; it reflects a strategic commitment to ensuring that horticulture businesses have access to capable, motivated professionals who understand the industry and want to be part of it long term.

**Carville M. Akehurst Memorial Scholarship:** Mona Jones — Cornell University.

**Timothy S. and Palmer W. Bigelow, Jr. Scholarship:** Ella May — University of Connecticut.

**Bryan A. Champion Memorial Scholarship:** Katelyn Boyce — The Ohio

State University.

**Cultivate the Future**

**Scholarship:** Kathryn Huether — Stephen F. Austin State University.

**Gunter Mecking Memorial**

**Scholarship:** Layne Krug — Purdue University.

**Mugget Scholarship**

- Luke Duncan — California State Polytechnic University, Pomona.
- Freddy Mendez Urbano — The Ohio State University.

**Spring Meadow — Proven Winners**

**Scholarships:**

- Tanner Hamerling — University of Georgia.
- Jenna Hoffman — Iowa State University.
- Greg Marshall — NC State University.
- Jesse Potts — University of Florida.
- Ryan Joseph Rey — University of Florida.
- Joseph Romano — University of Delaware.
- Nathan Sims — University of Rhode Island.
- Stacey Thorne — Lake Washington Institute of Technology.

**Susie & Bruce Usrey Education**

**Scholarship:** Paul Crocker — California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo.

**Usrey Family Scholarship:** Luke Duncan — California State Polytechnic University, Pomona.

**Dennis & Harriet Walters Memorial**

**Scholarship:** Landon Erbrick — Auburn University.

**John B. & Elizabeth Wight Memorial**

**Scholarship:** James Hines, IV — Tennessee Tech University. ©

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