

# Why Future Arborists Need Your Help Now: Starting a Career During a Global Pandemic

By Corinne G. Bassett, Sarah L. Anderson, and Susan D. Day

**H**unkering down, trimming expenses, and watching the usual business of arboriculture and urban forestry slow to a trickle? You're not alone. The International Labour Organization reports that as of May 17, 2020, 94% of global workers are in a country where there are recommended or required workplace closures (ILO 2020). The coronavirus pandemic has us all reexamining our work, what's critical, and what's not. Thanks to our professional organizations, tree care has rightly been deemed an "essential service" in many jurisdictions during the pandemic. Yet work is slow at best, local and regional governments are having their budgets slashed, construction has been paused or slowed, and industry and government alike must bear the burden of new expenses associated with work routines that allow for physical distancing. Nonetheless, it is more important than ever to look to the future—and the future employee in particular.



UBC Urban Forestry brings students, professors, and local stakeholders together for a program review night. Photograph courtesy of UBC Urban Forestry Program.

Starting a career in arboriculture or urban forestry has never been easy, but with the coronavirus pandemic, the job hunting landscape is even more perplexing for those entering the profession. Internships have been postponed or canceled entirely, and new hires are told their jobs are "on hold" or are having their hours cut to almost nothing. This is a critical juncture for a profession that has long struggled to have a sustainable employee pipeline. What we do now will determine where we will be standing when the economy rebounds.

Who are the arborists and urban foresters of the future, and what kinds of choices are they making right now? For those just getting their feet wet in arboriculture and urban forestry, the pandemic has the potential to sever or weaken ties to potential employers and the profession as a whole. For tree care companies, universities, governments, and other institutions, the pandemic has meant an almost instantaneous pivot to new work procedures and modes of communication, in some cases stalling significant aspects of the support they previously had in place for new hires.

It's easy to feel overwhelmed, but now is the time to communicate more frequently, not just with customers, but also with future employees and professional associations. Envision your organization one year from now, or even ten years from now. Will it have an energized and well-trained workforce? We propose that now is the time to cultivate talent—reach out to future arborists, strengthen recruiting, networking, training, and mentorship. Thoughtful action now will help us all come out stronger on the other side of this crisis.

## The Case for Action Now

Why do we need to reach out now? As much as we hear the term "unprecedented times" applied to the COVID-19 crisis, economic recessions are not unprecedented, and our industry has successful case studies to look back upon for guidance. To start, there is a strong global precedent of the power of the forestry and natural resource management sectors to provide employment during times of economic

stress (Nair and Rutt 2009). The United States, for example, founded the Civilian Conservation Corps in 1929 in response to the Great Depression, creating what would now be termed a green jobs and a national employment network. In 2009, this model was successfully implemented again through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act's funding of United States Forest Service programs (Kimbell and Brown 2009).

Before COVID-19, arboriculture and urban forestry as professions were already dealing with systemic workforce issues. For urban forestry, studies have identified a scarcity of entry-level job postings, which, combined with an ageing industry leadership cohort, creates a difficult career path for newcomers to maneuver successfully into their careers (O'Herrin et al. 2018; Urban Forestry 2020). For tree care more generally, American Forests' Tree Equity: Career Pathways Initiative began in 2018 to help fill more than 8,000 urban forestry annual job openings (Career OneStop 2018), specifically in response to existing gaps and inconsistencies in the workforce pipeline. The tree professions have been working diligently to improve these career paths and workforce pipelines, and now is not the time to pause in these efforts, but to reimagine our way forward.

There is also an opportunity cost to waiting. The class of 2020 graduates of arboriculture, urban forestry, natural resource management, environmental science, and related degree programs cannot and will not wait for jobs in our industry to open up to start their careers. If we fail to actively recruit recent graduates, current students, and unemployed workers into our industry, they will start on other paths and likely not come back. Similarly, workers who have lost their non-arboriculture jobs because of the COVID-19 crisis are almost certainly casting a wider net in their job search than previously. These workers may be more open to joining arboriculture and urban forestry if given the opportunity—for many of us it was just such a serendipitous opportunity that opened our eyes to arboriculture and urban forestry. This last is a short-term opportunity, as the most qualified workers are likely the first to be rehired.

Additionally, we will likely also be facing a gap in training program graduates. According to a recent International Labour Organization report (ILO 2020), "both technical and vocational education and training and on-the-job training are suffering massive disruption. In a recent ILO–UNESCO–World Bank joint survey, around 98 per cent of respondents reported a complete or partial closure of technical and vocational schools and training centres." The tree care industry will continue to be affected by a shortage of workers for years to come if we cannot recruit and train these future arborists now.

Although the economic outlook looks bleak at the moment, there may be a silver lining of sorts for arboriculture and urban forestry in terms of long-term demand for trees. Not only are many arboriculture jobs being deemed



University of British Columbia, Bachelor of Urban Forestry students on a field skills course at the Malcom Knapp Research Forest. Photograph courtesy of UBC Urban Forestry Program.

as "essential services" for public safety reasons, the renewed public interest in green infrastructure will keep this industry alive and valued into the future. During the pandemic, we see cities and communities valuing their green space and trees more than ever. In Vancouver, Canada, for example, residents are urged daily to go outside for their mental and physical health. The first moves towards opening restaurants have been through their outdoor spaces. Another aspect expected to grow our industry's work is in the areas of emergency management and storm response. To respond to current demand for our essential work and expected growth in demand for this work in the future, we must plan now.

### Strategies to Recruit Future Arborists

Regardless of your position within the industry, you have a role to play in the tree care workforce ecosystem. Both top-down and bottom-up investment are needed.

Our resilience as a field relies on everyone's investment in strengthening local relationships. By communicating your challenges and successes frequently with your regional partners, your concerns can be better channeled to government and affect policies implemented in this crisis (ILO 2020).

### Are You Hiring Now?

- Double down on intentional online marketing efforts to reach a broader range of potential hires.
- Call up your local universities, community colleges, Conservation Corps chapters, and others to advertise your positions and connect with their job-seeking graduates.
- Widen your audience. Uncertain situations create opportunities to recruit employees from diverse pools. People are likely to be more willing to try new jobs and industries during this uncertain time, so reaching out to non-traditional partners like faith





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institutions and temp agencies could potentially prove more fruitful.

- Rethink your hiring criteria. What is really essential in the new hire? It's easy to fall into hiring patterns that confine recruiting efforts, resulting in missed opportunities. For example, if you are looking for someone with at least one summer's experience in tree care, perhaps what you really need is someone who likes working outside or has experience in a safety-oriented production culture.
- Try out these talking points:
  - Tree work is being deemed essential. Work in this industry can be stable and secure.
  - Any entry-level position can be more than just a way to receive pay and benefits; it can be the beginning of a rewarding career in arboriculture. There is room to grow in this industry.
  - New hires can find belonging through affinity groups and trade organizations. Highlight the credentials, like ISA Certified Arborist®, that you can help them attain.

### Are You Unable to Hire Now, but Are Looking to in the Future?

- Take this time to reflect on your hiring and recruiting practices to be able build back in the post-COVID-19 economic environment. Explore local resources to support your self-assessment of your current practices, including the Career Pathways Action Guide (Vibrant Cities Lab 2020).
- Align your work with industry, regional, and national standards to be able to take full advantage of special programs. For example, in the US, if you align hiring practices with US Bureau of Labor and Statistics apprenticeship program, you can get funds to help offset the salary of new employees.



Students visit a local tree nursery. Photograph courtesy of UBC Urban Forestry Program.

- Consider novel approaches to build relationships with future potential hires, such as virtual mentorship programs and shadow days. Build your bank of connections and strengthen your networks to hire from in the future.

### Do You Want to Support or Already Work with Students or Early Career Individuals Looking to Build Their Careers?

- Create hubs or affinity groups in your region that connect green industry employers and “workforce” sources. These groups can serve as a hub for mentorship programs and avenues for new partners to be involved.
- Look for creative ways to actively invite student and early career professionals into your regular outreach work, such as inviting them to introduce speakers on webinar panels or be featured in your newsletters and social media.
- For every event, designate a point person to intentionally include students and recent graduates. Keep open channels of communication with student groups that could overlap with forestry. In the US, for example, student groups such as Minorities in Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Related Sciences (MANRRS) and Future Farmers of America are good possibilities.
- Advocate for arboriculture and urban forestry to be included in local workforce support efforts through networking with your area's workforce board or regional council.
- Raise funding for students to attend conferences and workshops early in their career. Reach out to educational institutions who may be eager to partner with you.

### Closing

During this time, let us all be reminded that in order to thrive, we must stay connected. We propose that the arboricultural and urban forestry community are in a critical window to aid newcomers. The COVID-19 global pandemic has made the importance of intentionally widening our networks and strengthening ties with our professional organizations more important than ever. Let's reach out and cultivate the next generation of arborists now.

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Tree planting in Wilmington, DE, with Branches to Chances trainee cohort of the Delaware Center for Horticulture. Photograph courtesy of American Forests.

2020 has been a fascinating and challenging year. Not what any of us expected as we celebrated, networked, and learned at the Annual Conference last year in Knoxville, TN. I recently participated in a virtual town hall with our Council of Representatives. One of the toughest questions they asked was, "What is the one thing that was on the ISA Board's agenda that you wish you could have addressed?"

Our ISA Governance is based on Policy Governance, which keeps the Board focused on the future and delegates the day-to-day operations to staff through our amazing Executive Director, Caitlyn Pollihan. We do this through a series of End Statements, which are the destination we want to arrive at in the future. We also establish a series of Executive Limitations to tell staff what they can't do, but everything else is available. This allows and encourages creativity and reduces the need for the Board to focus on means or operations.

Along with COVID, we've also seen an increase in attention on diversity, inclusion, and the #BlackLivesMatter movement. One of the core values of ISA is spelled out in our End Statement 1.3: "Increasing numbers of people view arboriculture and urban forestry as a diverse and inclusive profession worth considering as a career." This is one of seven End Statements that we've established as the main guiding tenets for ISA. This is the area where I wish we had been able to do more during this year.

I am proud to announce that the Board of Directors recently decided to invite Corinne Bassett to join the board as a nonvoting Student Representative for a year starting in August to help represent a younger and earlier career perspective as the board works throughout the year. In addition, she will help us design an ongoing program to ensure we have a more diverse perspective on the board. Corinne is going to be a valuable addition to our Board.

We are planting seeds, and it will take all of you to cultivate and care for our organization and industry as we move into the future. Just like in our communities and forests, diversity is key to resilience. We must have a diverse and inclusive profession.

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