

# ARBORIST CERTIFICATION IN OHIO

by Sharon Lilly

**Abstract.** The Ohio Chapter of ISA has recently certified it's first 97 arborists. The first examination was the result of three years work. During that three-year period, representatives of many other chapters contacted the Ohio chapter for information and advice about building a certification program. The Ohio chapter researched many existing certification programs and adopted the strongest features of each. This article outlines the procedures followed in developing the Ohio Arborist Certification program. It may serve as a guideline for chapters planning certification.

**Résumé.** Le chapitre de l'Ohio de l'ISA a récemment certifié ses 95 premiers arboriculteurs. La première période d'examen fut le résultat de trois années de travail. Au cours de cette période, des représentants de plusieurs autres chapitres ont contacté la chapitre de l'Ohio pour obtenir des informations et des conseils sur la mise en place d'un programme de certification. Le chapitre de l'Ohio a rassemblé plusieurs programmes de certification existants et a retenu les meilleurs éléments de chacun. Cet article résume la procédure suivie lors de l'élaboration du programme de certification. Il pourra servir d'exemple pour les chapitres planifiant la mise en place d'un tel programme.

Certification has become a major concern for arborists across the country. Many ISA chapters have the subject of certification under current study. The development of a certification program is a long and ongoing process. Those who have been involved can attest to the magnitude of the task.

The Ohio Chapter, after three years of hard work, is now enjoying the fruits of its labor. The first Ohio Arborist Certification examination was given in January and the program has "graduated" it's first 97 arborists.

In the past three years, representatives of several ISA chapters have written for advice and information about starting certification programs. This article outlines the procedure followed by the Ohio Chapter. It is offered to assist other chapters in developing certification programs. The experience of the Ohio chapter may help others overcome some obstacles and avoid some pitfalls.

**Preliminary Steps.** When the board of directors of the Ohio Chapter first considered professional certification, there were many questions to be answered. Did Ohio arborists want or feel the need for certification? Should the Ohio Chapter be involved with certifying? What were the legal im-

plications? How much would the program cost? An ad hoc committee was formed to investigate these issues. All phases of arboriculture were represented on the committee: commercial, utility, municipal, consulting, and university and technical school educators. Every effort was made to ensure that each point of view was given a voice. Several commercial arborists were on the committee since it was felt that they would be most affected by certification.

**Survey.** Our first step was to prepare a survey for distribution to chapter members. The survey briefly explained what a certification program would involve and the format it might take. The survey asked, "Are you in favor of certification of arborists in Ohio?" and, "Do you think that the Ohio Chapter should undertake the project?"

The response was overwhelming. More than 90% supported both propositions. Many offered additional comments detailing the need for such a program. Some felt that certification was long overdue; others asked to be involved in establishing the program.

**Constitution and Bylaws.** There was still some question whether it was appropriate for the ISA to be certifying arborists. The committee contacted the Urbana office to find out the official position. At that time, there was no plan for national involvement although the chapters were being encouraged to proceed. The committee was given the names of representatives of other chapters already involved with certification.

The Ohio Chapter's constitution and bylaws were carefully reviewed to ensure that there was no clause prohibiting or restricting such a program. Since certification would be an educational program and would promote professionalism in arboriculture, the committee felt it would be fitting for the chapter to be involved. Further research revealed that most professional certification programs were administered by similar organizations.

**Background and Research.** It was helpful to review what other chapters had already done. The Illinois Chapter was able to recommend a study that later proved to be very useful.

The Western Chapter seemed to have the strongest arborist certification program to date. They had written a study guide that was both popular and helpful. In addition, the Western Chapter was certifying both arborists and tree workers in a dual program.

However, it was the Ohio Nurserymen's Association that provided the most help to our certification committee. The ONA has developed a very strong and thorough certification program for landscape installers and nurserymen. The study guides for each of these programs are concise and informative. These programs have been running successfully for several years and the ONA staff was more than willing to give advice and consultation along the way.

**Legal Implications.** The committee sought legal advice concerning the implications of administering a certification program. The chapter's attorney, Victor Merullo, advised that there was ample precedent for certification in other professions. He cautioned that the program must be carefully established to avoid discrimination in any form. He offered to review the program upon completion and to help in any way possible.

Some excellent legal advice was obtained from a publication recommended by the Illinois Chapter entitled, "A Survey and Assessment of Voluntary Certification: A Study of the Concept, Application and Feasibility of Determining Occupational Competence" (1). This study was prepared by William R. Nelson for the Illinois Landscape Contractors Association. The document should be required reading for any chapter involved with certification.

Nelson's study provides a basic "how to" for establishing and administering a certification program. Of particular significance is the section dealing with the legal implications of certification. This section summarizes the legal precedents for challenging certification programs in the courts. Though only a few court cases have been brought, the background will help committees to avoid a number of legal pitfalls.

All certification programs must comply with certain government regulations. There are two regulatory agencies involved in federal antitrust regulations, the Justice Department and the Federal Trade Commission. The laws are intended to assure free and unfettered competition.

Therefore, if an organization establishes a certification program that, intentionally or not, excludes competitors or restrains free trade, it may be in violation of antitrust laws. Nelson's study goes a step further to outline the Justice Department's provisions for avoiding an antitrust challenge.

The United States Chamber of Commerce *Association Letter*, published an article by Jerald R. Jacobs, "Professional Credentialing by Associations: Some Cases and Guidelines." Jacobs' guidelines have proven invaluable to the Ohio Chapter in establishing the requirements and criteria for certification. These guidelines are also included in Nelson's study.

**Format and Administration.** A great deal of care was necessary in formulating the structure of the certification program. Regulations concerning eligibility and requirements must be defensible and non-discriminating. All criteria must be reasonable and cannot restrict free trade or fair competition.

We decided that chapter membership should not be a requirement for eligibility. Excluding an individual who did not wish to join ISA from becoming certified was a constraint of trade. We also decided that requiring non-members to sign the ISA Code of Ethics, though desirable, could also be challenged, and could not be defended as a reasonable criterion for certification. However, since ISA was sponsoring and administering the program, we felt justified in charging a higher fee for non-members.

We also decided not to require residency in Ohio to become an Ohio Certified Arborist. Some arborists live outside Ohio yet practice in Ohio. In fact, the Ohio Chapter has quite a few members from other states.

The committee wanted a minimum experience (or education) requirement for eligibility. However, this provision would prove difficult to define. Would landscape maintenance work count? What about arboretum experience? Suppose the applicant had been self-employed, doing a variety of yard, landscape and tree work. Rather than create a difficult and adversarial situation, the committee elected to certify arborists based on the examination alone.

The certification program must be voluntary.

The ISA has no power to administer or enforce a mandatory program. Besides, licensing had been attempted and had failed in the past.

Certification would be for individuals only. There is no practical method for certifying a company. Also, we elected not to have a grandfather clause. For a certification program to be fair, valid and meaningful, only those that can pass the test should be able to use the title.

**Board Proposal and Financing.** A fee structure was developed to raise money from the sale of study guides, registration and recertification. The committee was confident that the program would be paying for itself within three years after testing began. Some seed money was required, however. Based on other programs, it was estimated that the initial costs would be around \$5,000. We felt that if most of the labor was volunteer, the costs could be reduced significantly.

The board of directors approved the proposal and its financing, although no money was budgeted the first year. Since most of the preliminary work involved planning and writing, costs were minimal. Most of the expenses were incurred in the year before testing began.

The ad hoc certification committee was subsequently given formal status as a standing committee. We were given responsibility for administering the program and for making policy decisions regarding certification.

A plan was developed in which the six committee members would serve three-year terms with two members to be replaced each year. The Ohio Chapter executive director would serve as the seventh committee member. In order to serve on the committee an individual need be neither an ISA member nor a certified arborist. The proposed constitutional amendment was put to membership vote in a special ballot.

In the meantime, the original 14 member ad hoc committee was cut back to a core of experienced educators and practicing arborists. The smaller group began work to establish the foundation of the program, write the study guide and build a bank of exam questions.

**What is an Arborist?** Although the question seems a bit pedantic, it was one of the toughest and most important questions the committee

tackled. After many hours of debate, the committee was unable to agree on a workable definition. The crux of the issue was the determination of a testing level. In order to determine a minimum level of competence, the committee needed to decide what an arborist did.

The variation and range in job descriptions of an arborist made this a difficult task. Some arborists earn a living climbing trees, while others are strictly involved with consulting, and have many years of college behind them. The committee decided that the thrust of the program was to protect our clients and their trees. Thus, our target became the "tree expert" that recommends or provides care to trees.

**Preparation of the Study Guide.** The certification committee evaluated study guides produced by other certification groups. Many of them referred to an array of standard textbooks for detailed information. We felt that while many fine texts are available, many arborists do not have access to them. We estimated the cost of obtaining several of the most widely used texts to be a prohibitive \$200. The committee wanted to provide the certification applicants with most of the basic background material necessary, and no single text served that purpose. Since we had neither the money nor the manpower to write a study guide from scratch, we decided to look at what was available from other sources. One very important consideration was the final cost to the arborist. Our goal was set to keep the study guide price between \$50 and \$100.

We drew up an outline of study categories that included tree identification, plant selection and installation, anatomy and physiology, pruning, cabling and bracing, problem diagnosis and treatment, tree care and maintenance, safety and legal aspects. We felt that arborists should have some basic knowledge in each of these categories.

The committee was able to assemble a study packet in the form of a loose-leaf notebook containing a number of excellent but inexpensive publications. The study packet consists of Smithyman's *The Tree Workers Manual*, the NAA Standards and the ANSI Z133.1 standards. Also included are several Ohio State University Extension Service publications including *Ohio Trees*, bulletins covering insects, diseases and tree fer-

tization, and 35 "fact sheets" that each deal with a particular tree health problem or maintenance practice.

To tie the various publications together and cover some details not discussed in the materials provided, a study guide was drafted. The study guide emphasizes the importance of each area of study to the practicing arborist. The guide recommends reading within the study packet as well as in other appropriate references. It gives new information where applicable. The entire "Legal Aspects" section was written from scratch since none of the other references covered that material. Each section ends with some sample examination questions.

**The Exam.** The committee started building the question bank very early in the process. Members were asked to write examination questions between meetings. The questions were collected, put on computer, and sent out to each committee member for review. These "mail reviews" continued over a period of two years.

We felt that the validity of the test was most important. The exam must be relevant and meaningful. In other words, the questions must test what an arborist really needs to know. It is very easy to write questions that are overly technical or too detailed. Our goal was to write questions with a practical application, and avoid testing reading comprehension or endurance.

Eventually we accumulated more than 500 questions that had survived the initial screening. We then convened a marathon meeting to carefully analyze each question. Some questions were discarded, while others were rewritten. We looked for any aspect that would make a question unclear, ambiguous or otherwise invalid.

Our next step was to do a preliminary test. The committee lined up arborists with various backgrounds from all around the country. In all, 25 arborists took the sample test. They were all encouraged to make comments and note any questions that might need revision. Then they were asked to fill out a questionnaire about their experience and education in arboriculture. They were also asked to evaluate the test as to content, difficulty and balance of subject matter.

When all of the results were in, they were analyzed carefully. Each question was reviewed

to determine the percentage that answered it correctly, and which answers were given when the question was answered incorrectly. All of the comments were noted and a few changes were made to clarify ambiguous statements. Overall, the comments indicated that the exam was on target for difficulty and balance, although a few thought that it was too long at 200 questions. The preliminary testing provided us with some valuable input in preparing the exam.

The committee decided to shorten the exam to 175 multiple choice questions. The exam included 25 plant samples for identification and diagnosis. Approximately half of the written questions were core questions that would appear on each of five exams. The remaining questions were distributed between the five.

**Promotion.** Each issue of the Ohio chapter newsletter carried an announcement or article concerning certification. A brochure was developed to explain all of the details of the program. The brochure was distributed to arborists throughout the state. It was also available at all the chapter functions. Following the exam a sample press release was sent to each certified arborist. Another press release was distributed to each of Ohio's major newspapers. The article contained a list of all of the local arborists that passed the certification exam. A list of certified arborists was made available to urban foresters, county extension agents and city arborists throughout the state.

Truck stickers, patches and logo sheets were also prepared for those who passed the test. The Ohio Certified Arborist logo appeared with anything related to the program, or wherever it might help arborists become familiar with it.

The response to the certification program was much greater than expected. The word spread quickly, and most of the comments were positive. The first exam drew a capacity crowd. Applicants began reserving space in the second exam before the first was given. Best of all, perhaps, the program began to pay for itself after the first six months.

**Seminar.** Since the certification program was designed to be educational, we planned to give pre-testing seminars. The purpose was to review pertinent material and emphasize the latest infor-

mation. The goal in certifying arborists was not to eliminate some from competition, but to establish a minimum level of competence. The more arborists certified, the better for the industry. On the other hand, the exam had to be stringent enough to be meaningful.

**Recertification.** The committee decided that certification should be for a period of three years. The idea was to encourage arborists to stay abreast of the latest research and recommendations. Recertification could be achieved either by re-examination, or by accumulating educational credits. The committee developed a list of approved seminars and workshops that could be attended for recertification credits. Three credits had to be obtained in the three year period.

#### **Summary: How to Build a Certification Program**

1. Confirm that the membership of your organization, especially those that will be most affected, support the concept.
2. Thoroughly research and analyze existing trends in certification, and be aware of all pertinent laws and regulations.
3. Organize a strong and devoted committee to work on the project.
4. Prepare a budget. Include all foreseeable costs. Obtain the financial backing of the sponsoring organization.
5. Define the testing objectives and know the target group.
6. Prepare a study guide that will assist applicants in preparing for the exam.
7. Prepare the exam. Carefully review each question. Analyze for readability, length, comprehension level and subject matter. Remember the most important factor is the exam's validity. The exam must test information that is an integral part of work performance and professional competency.
8. Plan each aspect of the program's administration with care. Avoid discriminatory policies, and provide equal opportunities for all members of the profession.
9. Promote the program within the industry as well as with the general public. Never endorse a specific certified individual over other arborists, although it is acceptable to endorse certified professionals in general.
10. The certifying board should be autonomous from the parent organization.

#### **Literature Cited**

1. Nelson, W.R. 1981. A Survey and Assessment of Voluntary Certification. Illinois Landscape Contractors Association, Lombard, Illinois.

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