Graduate Program Guidelines

MS students - within the first 6 months; PhD students – within the first 12 months:

a. Form advisory committee
b. Hold meeting of advisory committee
c. Submit approved plan of study to the Graduate Administrative Assistant
d. Submit research working plan to the Graduate Administrative Assistant
e. Meet with the Department Head by end of both fall and spring semesters
f. Annual evaluation by end of spring semester

1. Time Limits to Graduation
   A. PhD degree
      From BS to PhD = 6 years (5 is target)
      From MS to PhD = 4.5 years (3 is target)
   B. MS degree
      From BS to MS = 3 years (2 is target)

2. Time Limit for Financial Assistance (GTA or GRA from University/College/Dept.)
   MS = 2 years; PhD = 3 years.
   Advisors may employ extramural funds for up to time limits for graduation.

3. Teaching/Extension Experience
   All PhD students are required to assist with our teaching or extension mission for at least one semester during their tenure. This assignment will be made by the Department Head or the Graduate Program Director after consultation with the Major Advisor. MS students will be given the opportunity for assistance but it is not a requirement.

4. Annual Evaluation
   The Graduate Student Evaluation Form should be filled out by the end of spring semester each year and returned to the Graduate Administrative Assistant. Please see the Horticulture Department Web site for the required form. The annual evaluation is required by the graduate school so the forms will be archived in the department and forwarded.

5. Advisory Committee
   With approval of the Major Advisor, an advisory committee consisting of at least three VT faculty (exceptions for members from another university must be approved by the Department Head), including a Major Advisor (can be Assistant Professor, Associate Professor, or Professor) for MS or four members for PhD should be assembled and a meeting held within the first 6 months after matriculation for MS students and 12
months for PhD students. MS students are encouraged to have a member from another department. PhD students are required to have at least one member from another department. Adjunct and Administrative/Professional faculty from Virginia Tech and faculty from other universities may serve as additional committee members if approved by the Department Head. Students should provide advisory committee members a copy of their proposed course of study and research working plan (see below) before the first committee meeting.

6. Research Working Plan
A research working plan (proposed outline of research plan) approved by the advisory committee should be filed with the Graduate Administration Assistant within the first 6 months after matriculation for MS students and 12 months for PhD students. The plan can be updated as needed.

7. Plan of Study
A proposed plan of classes to be taken must be approved by the advisory committee and the signed form turned in to the Graduate Administration Assistant within the first 6 months after matriculation for MS students and 12 months for PhD students. Please see the Horticulture Department Web site for the required form. Changes in the plan of study must be submitted on a form available from the graduate school and signed by all of the advisory committee and the Department Head.

8. Preliminary Exam
PhD students are required to pass a Preliminary Exam. This exam is intended to test the student’s intellectual expertise in their area of interest and their capacity for completing the proposed dissertation research. The exam typically consists of a written section and an oral section. The structure of the exam is the responsibility of the Major Advisor. All advisory committee members must be present for the exam (can be present via electronic means). A majority favorable vote is required for passing. The exam can be taken only once more if not passed on the initial exam. Please see the graduate school guidelines. The exam should be taken by the end of the second year of study or at least a full calendar year before defense of the dissertation. Students must register for the exam with the graduate school well in advance of the exam date. Please see the graduate school web site for details. If not already at or above, stipend levels will be raised to step 12 the semester following passing the preliminary exam.

Both graduate degrees are research-based and require a written thesis (MS) or dissertation (PhD). Students work closely with their advisory committee to develop the document. The thesis/dissertation must be “defended” orally with all advisory committee members present. A majority favorable vote is required for passing. The defense can be taken only once more if not passed initially. The defense is considered to
be a final exam and students must register well in advance of the exam date with the
graduate school. The updated dissertation/thesis must be approved by the graduate
school within two weeks of the defense, so the defense cannot be scheduled unless the
document is in excellent shape and has been reviewed by the advisory committee. The
advisory committee must concur that it is in good enough shape to hold the defense.
Please see the graduate school web site for their guidelines for the thesis/dissertation
defense and the required form that indicates the result of the exam (must have the
form at the defense). The thesis/dissertation is archived electronically by Virginia Tech.
Most advisors require the thesis/dissertation to be in a format that facilitates
publication in scientific journals.

10. Research Data
All data accumulated during study for graduate degrees are joint property of the Major
Advisor and the student. If the degree is not obtained, data are the property of the
Major Advisor.

11. Student Responsibilities
   a. Embrace a collaborative spirit with other graduate students and departmental
      personnel.
   b. Be a scholar. Attend seminars in our department regularly and seek other seminars
      and learning opportunities that both deepen and broaden your perspectives.
   c. Demonstrate steady progress toward completion of the graduate degree.
   d. Make sure all responsibilities listed above are accomplished on time.
   e. Meet with your Major Advisor frequently. Keep him/her closely informed of
      progress in classes and research.
   f. Keep the rest of the advisory committee regularly informed of progress.
   g. Inform Major Advisor well in advanced of proposed absences (e.g., holidays).
   h. Learn and follow safety procedures at all times.
   i. Provide Major Advisor with a manuscript(s) suitable for publication by the time of
      graduation.
   j. Seek opportunities to acquire teaching and extension experience.

12. Major Advisor responsibilities
   a. Provide an intellectually stimulating environment for students.
   b. Be an active mentor to students. Meet with them regularly. Discuss interesting and
      relevant research manuscripts on a regular basis.
   c. Seek funding to support tuition, stipends, and research of students.
   d. Provide students a research project that will significantly advance the field of
      horticulture or other plant sciences and that will prepare students to compete
      effectively for academic, industry, or government positions.
   e. Make sure that students are trained in proper safety procedures.
f. Provide opportunities for students to attend research conferences and encourage them to present their work.
g. Facilitate teaching and extension opportunities for students.
h. Monitor student progress and ensure that each student is on schedule to complete each stage of his/her program.
i. Respect student rights; read graduate school guidelines.
j. Be clear on expectations from students. Expect excellence and document unsatisfactory performance with letter(s) addressed to underperforming students. Follow through on uncorrected performance by dismissing students with proper protocol.