

GROWERTALKS

Columns

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Young Voices: Opportunities to be Thankful For

Sylvia Schaap

"Wk 22" I write on the yellow sticky card with a Sharpie. I peel off the paper to expose the sticky to unfortunate insects and set the card back in between the plants. I trip over a thought (ahem, feet) and nearly send myself sprawling over the beautiful Cupressus plugs.

Next week is Week 22 already?

It's been five weeks. It feels like longer, and at the same time it feels like I've just stepped off that WestJet. I count the hours on my fingers, figuring out what time it is back home in Ontario.

3:00 p.m. Exactly one year ago I would have been in the family greenhouse picking snapdragons or up to my elbows in one of my Pa's beehives. A year from now I'll be a week or two away from graduation.

Today, though, I'm working with the crops of Qualitree Propagators across the continent in beautiful British Columbia. For that, I have to thank my sister and her thumbs, at least in part. Last year in August, I was in Holland when I got a text from her: "Hey—Jenn and I are booking our flights to BC. Want me to book one for you, too?"

I said no. I was a student with two years of school and a car behind me, two years of school (and a car) ahead, and I had just spent weeks away from the greenhouse where I was *supposed* to make money. Luckily, adventurous-me out-argued realistic-and-responsible-me and I thumbed back: "Actually, yeah sure ..."

I grab a pot of lavender, up-end it, check the roots and take a soil sample. Potted plants are a new science to me. Back home, Pa grows cut flowers in beds, and while my mom's and my stash of potted treasures threatens to take over propagation space in the seed-house, I have little experience with pots. Now I'm working with thousands. For that, I have to thank my cousin's boyfriend's grower-sister, at least in part.

The same day we landed in BC, we met up with her at Qualitree. And the plants! There were acres and acres of them, all green! We zipped around in a little golf cart and she proudly showed us those stunning plants, giving us a quick rundown of all the interesting and creative things that were going on. She found out I was

studying horticulture at the University of Guelph and, while navigating a sharp turn around a tidy bed of white cedars, she said offhand, “We actually need another grower for the summer. Would you ...?”

I laughed a bit and didn’t think about it much then. Once I got back to Ontario, I texted and asked her if she had been serious, and she answered with the head grower’s email address. I wasn’t expecting to even get an answer. After all, what was the chance that I actually could work at a place like Qualitree?

Heading back to the front of the greenhouse, laden with plastic baggies filled with soil, a hand lens and extra sticky cards, pens and paper bags of leaf samples, I still can’t believe I am working at Qualitree. I would pinch myself to make sure I don’t have to wake up and go write that Biological Activities of Insecticides exam again, but my hands are full. And speaking of full, every day my mind is being filled with new information, experiences and gorgeous views. For that I have to thank Qualitree, in full, for their willingness to give this opportunity to an under-experienced student who wrote one over-enthusiastic email in between studying for exams.

Before the fall semester’s midterm exam season was over, I had planned an extended trip to BC and I had one detail worked out. The rest—living and transportation and all that unimportant stuff—would eventually fall into place. I wrote that Insecticides exam (I know I did) on Thursday. It was winter/reluctant spring when I flew out on Friday morning and full-on spring/impatient summer when I landed Friday afternoon. I bought my little green ’96 Golf on Saturday and started work on Monday.

That entire first week I felt like I had stuck a fork in an outlet. I have to thank that stubborn Golf for that. It was a stick shift and I wasn’t acquainted with the clutch. How many times can a blonde stall during a 15-minute commute down a few river-following roads? As if starting a new job isn’t exciting enough, I turned the heads of early risers (*and* their dogs) with my less-than-graceful attempts at getting to work. But get to work I did, somehow!

The transition into the company was smooth and for that I have to thank everyone at Qualitree. It was spring and everyone was frantically doggie-paddling their way through the storm of orders, shipping, growing, etc.—which meant I was given a map of the offsite locations, a quick orientation and overview of how things were done and I had my independence. It felt great to be given responsibilities, be immediately included in the grower meetings and accepted, not as a learning student, but as a part of the team.

The head grower at Qualitree said today that if you have a passion in something, you can do anything. I suppose that over-enthusiastic email I sent him last year convinced him enough of my love for plants and for the industry to give me a shot. I had admitted to not knowing *anything* about any of the plants they grew and absolutely *nothing* about potted plants, but hurried on to contradict myself, saying that since I’d been surrounded by plants my entire life, I should know *something* ...

I dump all my supplies and day’s gleanings from the offsite greenhouses into that green Golf and pause with two things to ponder.

Number one: Everything, from “helping” sort freesia bulbs with my parents as a toddler to choosing plants as my life’s path contributed to that *something* I felt I had to defend. It’s a gut feeling, which I’ve learned to trust,

here at Qualitree more than ever. And with this out-of-the-blue opportunity, I can work on gaining that *anything* and erasing that *nothing*.

Number two: Where are my keys? **GT**

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