

GROWERTALKS

Columns

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How Horticulture Found Me

Melissa J. Kitchen

Horticulture has always been an important part of my life, but it wasn't until my mid-20s that I discovered it as a career path. I'm a horticulture transplant. Get it?

I was in dentistry by default, but I always found ways to have some horticulture in my life. I convinced my boss to participate in the American Cancer Society's Daffodil Days. He made a donation and in return they supplied us with daffodils to hand out to our patients. On my lunch breaks, I would wander the parking lot looking for wildflowers to pick. I would display them on my desk for our patients to admire. After the workday, I took evening classes in floral design through the local community college.

When I was 25, I enrolled in undergraduate studies in Plant Science at Cornell University. I loved the diversity of classes—Plant & Human Well-being, Annual & Perennial Plants, Berry Crops, Plant Function and Growth, Principles of Plant Propagation, Taxonomy of Cultivated Plants, Plant Genetics, Soil Science, Weed Science, Magical Mushrooms & Mischievous Molds, Insect Biology. Who knew that you could go to school and actually learn about the things that you love? It certainly was news to me!

When I graduated, I accepted a position with the Department of Horticulture as a research technician. In the winters, I worked with tulips, daffodils and hyacinths in a toasty warm greenhouse. In the spring, I sowed seeds and designed garden layouts. In the summers, I worked outside tending gardens and oversaw interns. During the fall, I did website work.

I've been able to do and see things I'd never even dreamed of. I travelled to the Netherlands and visited the world-famous flower auction. In Germany, I attend the world's largest horticulture trade show. In Colombia and Ecuador, I toured cut flower farms. In Costa Rica, I visited bedding plant propagation facilities. I've certainly been bitten by the international travel bug!

My position was flexible and grew with me. The more I knew, the greater my responsibilities became. As my interests grew, I was permitted to explore them. When I became interested in teaching and outreach, I tried my hand at those. I mentored the undergraduate horticulture club. I hosted open houses and garden tours. I trained Master Gardeners. Eventually, it became clear that education was calling me.

So I went back to school, again. I'm currently a fellow in the Cornell Plantations graduate program in Public

Garden Leadership. My focus is on youth education and my goal is to become an educator in a botanical garden. I want to share my love of horticulture with others and I want to encourage others to pursue horticulture as a career.

I'm so happy to be a part of this big horticulture family. People have been so warm and encouraging. They've freely shared their time and expertise with me—even going so far as letting me shadow them at their work, hosting me in their homes or letting me tag along on international business trips. Maybe we're all innately a bunch of nurturers.

I don't know of any other profession where so many people love their job. They're happy to wake up and go to work. They're happy doing what they're doing. They appreciate their coworkers. And they make our world a more beautiful place! **GT**

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