

GROWERTALKS

Cover Story

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The Creative Analyst

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When you meet Jane Stanley for the first time, you see a petite, pleasant person who's quick with a smile and a laugh. When you talk to her, you learn how incredibly smart she is, how hard working and enthusiastic she is, and how well she listens—really listens—to what you're saying.

It's all of these qualities that compelled Sonya Westervelt to nominate Jane for our Young Grower Award.



On her nomination form, Sonya wrote: "She simply rocks ... She is sharp as a tack, incredibly hard working and determined. All fantastic qualities in a grower!"

During the last five years, Jane has made her mark at Saunders Bros. She helped to cut their pesticide use by 50%. She created a system where they could rotate more crops through and establish more formal pruning cycles for their flowering shrubs. She's realized the value of the people who report to her and rewards them for their successes. She's increased communication between production and sales, providing a forum where everyone's voice is heard. And all of this by age 30.

The cerebral artiste

Jane grew up in a very creative, artistic family—her mother is a professional artist and her father has worked in advertising for years—so the creative juices definitely flow through the family. Her parents were avid gardeners, even opening a home nursery in their backyard as a side business when Jane was in college, so she grew up with an appreciation for plants and flowers. But it wasn't until she was attending the University of Virginia that she realized how much her appreciation would turn into passion.

"I started out thinking I was going to major in art history or linguistics or something, but that didn't really work out," admitted Jane. "So I decided to look at landscape design and landscape architecture, and in taking

some of those courses, found out that the part that I really liked was the plant part. Not so much the design and the artistic part; more of the plant and science part.”

She switched to Environmental Science with a focus on Ecology. From there, Jane earned her graduate degree in Horticulture from Penn State University.

It’s kind of funny that a girl who grew up in a creative family, and who attended a magnet school for literature and writing as a high schooler, would end up in a more analytical type of concentration like plant science. But just as creativeness flows through her veins, so does the ability to be a critical thinker. Her three older brothers also went down the cerebral path—two of them are software engineers in Silicon Valley after majoring in languages like French and Chinese in college.

“I think we’re all sort of wired similarly, which is that we have an appreciation for humanities and creative thought, but at the end of the day we’re all more on the analytical side of things,” said Jane. “But we didn’t get to find that out until a little bit later in life.”

But just because you’re a more methodical person doesn’t mean you can’t be creative. Jane would argue that there’s an art to solving problems.

“I don’t consider myself to be a very artistic person in the sense of creating art, but I think creative problem solving is where my creativity shows up,” explains Jane. “When you’re presented with a problem, I think of all of the different ways that I could possibly approach it and the potential outcomes. I think my creativity kind of manifested itself in that way.”

“Jane is driven by a strong personal desire to be and do the very best she can all the time,” explained Paul Westervelt, GrowerTalks columnist and grower at Saunders Bros. “If she doesn’t know something, she learns it. If something’s not working, she figures out why and tries again. If there’s not an existing strategy, she makes one.”



Jane of all trades

After graduating from Penn State, Jane moved back to northern Virginia and got a job working at a local garden center. She learned a ton while she was there, including how to manage people. The garden center bought plants from Saunders Bros. a few hours south in Piney River and Jane really enjoyed working with them, so when she heard there was an opening there, she jumped at the chance.

Jane was hired to be Saunders’ Quality Control Manager, which is a fancy title for someone who’s in charge of the integrated pest management (IPM) program. At first, she was handling IPM for the entire business, which was all of the woodies and their annual and perennial crops. She also started getting involved with the company’s new irrigation research because of her knowledge

on water and irrigation that she learned in graduate school. And she became a full-time grower as well, working with the sales team to figure out what to include in their product mix each year.

Saying that Jane wears a lot of hats would be an understatement. Although she now has help with IPM for the annuals and perennials, Jane is still responsible for irrigation and IPM for all woody crops, along with production start to finish for flowering shrubs.

“We’re trying to look at not only chemical controls, the problem and how do we kill it, because really, it’s a symptom of a broader pest complex,” explained Jane. “In IPM, we’re looking at lots of different control measures, not just chemicals. We’re looking at environmental controls, mechanical controls and our irrigation system, which has been a big part of helping to decrease our pesticide usage.” Which for Saunders Bros., has decreased by half in just three years.

“The chemical controls are one thing in our toolbox; it’s not the only thing that we’re doing,” said Jane. “Our IPM strategy isn’t just pesticides; it’s one piece in a much bigger picture.”

Mrs. Roboto ... with a heart

So how does Jane manage to juggle all of her responsibilities and avoid things falling through the cracks? Old-fashioned organization.

“I’m a big fan of systems,” she said. “I schedule out my week. There are things that have to happen every day, once a week or once a month, so making sure that I’m checking all of those boxes and then filling in the time for things that come up halfway through the week that have to be addressed. I have blocks of time, so I always know where I am and what I need to be doing so that I don’t miss something.”

Jane says that Paul and her other co-workers tease her about how orderly she is, but that it works really well for their team of rag-tag personalities.

“Paul calls me a robot,” Jane says, laughing. “Paul and I are such opposites that we make fun of each other, but we both have different strengths. We work really well as a team.”

“She’s positive, wicked smart and funny,” said Paul. “She simultaneously makes our team more productive and more fun.”

Robots may be able to problem solve, know every detail and organize it to a tee, but they’re usually lacking in the warm-and-fuzzy department when it comes to dealing with people. This is one area where Jane is not like a robot—she’s a kind, approachable person who’s easy to talk to—but she did have to learn communication and interpersonal skills.

“One of the things that I’ve had to work on is really forging partnerships and relationships with people in each of the different aspects of the company,” said Jane. “When I first came here there were a lot of challenges between production and sales and that’s always an interesting dichotomy because we have the same interest, but we’re coming at it from opposite sides. Production wants to sell out of everything and sales wants to be never sold

out because they always want to have inventory that they can sell, so we've got to find a happy medium. Really working on communication and getting everybody on the same page is something that's a challenge, but I think we've made a lot of progress."

In college, they may teach you the basics and how to be a critical thinker, but Jane has learned that in order to earn respect from your staff and colleagues, you must walk the walk. Luckily, she's has some good mentors in her life to show her.

"I was used to being very independent and being responsible for what I had to do, but you get into a nursery setting and there's just no way that you can physically do everything by yourself. You have to have people helping you, so you have to learn how to work with people," said Jane. "When you manage people, one of the things that seems to be universally important to people is to be treated fairly.

"The other thing that's really struck me is how important communication is with people, whether it's with co-workers or with your supervisors or your staff—just making sure that people feel like they have been heard and that they're contributing."

As someone who literally hungers for knowledge, Jane takes online classes for fun (no, seriously!) and there was a particular anecdote from a professor that's stayed with her: A patient was sitting in the waiting room of a heart surgeon's office, where a janitor was cleaning. Just to make conversation, the patient asked the janitor what he did at the office. The janitor answered, "I help the doctor save lives." Well, the patient was obviously skeptical, so he asked how the janitor saved lives. He said, "Well, I'm the janitor, so I'm responsible for keeping everything clean. If everything isn't clean and sterilized, someone could get an infection. So my job here is to help save lives."

"It sounds a little bit cheesy, but it really stuck with me—the idea that, as a manager, your job is to help people understand what they're doing to contribute to the bigger picture," said Jane. "Nobody feels like what they're doing is insignificant and that it's important and appreciated and necessary. For me, as a manager, if we're talking about doing a pesticide application, we're not just going out and spraying stuff. We're controlling the pest so we can create a high-quality product so that our customers are pleased and when the homeowner gets it and puts it in their yard, they have the best possible chance of being successful with it. It's not just that one act that you're doing; it's how it percolates down the line and contributes to something bigger."

Getting personal

When Jane isn't in a greenhouse or in a field among flowering shrubs, she continues to work on her mind with online courses, but she also focuses more on the physical side. She and her husband Wes are exercise and nutrition buffs, so during her spare time, Jane is running and lifting weights. She also trains in Brazilian Jiu Jitsu, which is a calmer form of mixed martial arts without the kicking and punching. The point is to subdue your opponent using wrestling submission techniques, chokes and blocks. So, yes, this small-statured woman can take you down.

"As a female, it made sense to try it for self-defense, but also as a fun challenge," said Jane. "The best description I can think of is that it's kind of like chess, but with the human body. Every time that you move, your opponent has various countermoves and you have to try and anticipate and figure out how they're going to react to you and what you're going to be able to do in turn. So you're always having to think a few steps

ahead. It's intellectually challenging and physically challenging as well."

Jane and Wes met in a nutrition class at the University of Virginia and have been together ever since, married for five years. Wes works for the government and has just returned from a six-month deployment to Afghanistan. (Jane said she's "so glad to have him home.")

As far as what the future holds, Jane laughs and says that she thinks about it all of the time. She's considered getting her MBA and possibly owning her own business someday. But for now, Jane is truly enjoying her career at Saunders Bros. and hopes to get involved in helping to spread the word about our industry to younger generations. She's excited about the Seed Your Future initiative and hopes that it will help get more young people eager to pursue horticulture, especially since it's a key concern.

"I think we kind of have a chicken and egg problem—everybody who's in the industry thinks the problem is that young people aren't interested, whereas young people think the problem is that the nursery doesn't pay enough or doesn't actually provide a real career," Jane said. "The truth is it's probably a little bit of both. It's hard because you want to recruit people and get them really excited about this industry, but at the same time, you want to do it in good conscience. You want to tell them that there are really great jobs out there and that you can make it a career. My hope is that we can get both sides a little bit closer to being on the same page."

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