

GROWERTALKS

Cover Story

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A New Road Taken

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Photography by Mark Widhalm



When Jill Mullaney won this year's Young Grower Award, we didn't know she was at a crossroads in her career.

For the past eight years, she's been the Greenhouse Manager at the Dallas Arboretum, where she wore many hats. (So she was literally a Jill-of-all-trades!) Jill did everything, from ordering and scheduling and sticking cuttings to filling trays and watering. She was enjoying her time at the arboretum, but she was starting to get antsy, wondering how much longer she wanted to toil during the summer in the hot Texas sun.

Then, in July, Jill got two surprises—winning the Young Grower Award and being offered a new job doing something completely different from what she was doing at the arboretum. And because it was such a great opportunity, and the fact that she was in the process of a little self-searching, she accepted.

So, as you read this, Jill will be about a month or so in to her new job as a Horticulturist & Accounts Manager for Halleck Horticultural. This new venture shows how willing Jill is to take risks and try something new, without the need for anyone else's direction. She sees the path she wants to go down and heads toward it at a brisk pace.

From farm girl to greenhouse girl

Jill grew up on a hog farm in South Dakota, so she spent her days outdoors from the time she started to walk. The farm also had a large garden that her mother tended, so she liked horticulture “before I knew it was a thing,” she said.

And, as with many farm kids, Jill was heavily involved with the local 4-H club and the FFA chapter. As an FFA member, Jill was able to take advantage of the Career Development Events for landscape and floriculture and that's when her love for plants began.

Still, she never really thought of horticulture as a career. When it was time to decide her major for college, she gravitated toward clothing design, since her mother taught her to sew and she has a creative streak that she wanted to tap into. But after a year, Jill knew clothing design wasn't for her.

"I missed being around plants and I missed working outside," said Jill. "Horticulture had been a thought for a second, but it never was serious until I realized I need to work with plants." So after freshman year, she switched her major to horticulture.

After graduating from the University of Nebraska, Jill worked for a landscape nursery company, but she didn't love it. "I quickly realized that building retaining walls was not my ideal situation," she said. She got a job working at Lauritzen Gardens, a botanic garden in Omaha, and then moved to Texas after she got the job at the Dallas Arboretum.

When she started, the greenhouses were on-site at the arboretum, but after plans were announced that they would have to be moved off-site to make room for a new children's garden, Jill and her staff were put to the test. Not only were they moving in the middle of production time, but they were moving 30 minutes away. It was a very stressful time.

"Honestly, it was intense," said Jill. "We just loaded everything up that we had. You don't think about every single rack and every single pot and all the stuff you have to move, but we made it happen somehow. We loaded plug trays onto racks and got them into their new home and put them right back under mist again."

Logistically, it presented a huge challenge. Jill and her team of employees and volunteers were used to just going to the greenhouse to get plants as they needed them. Now much more planning was involved to make sure that they had everything they needed for the day of planting. Jill had to learn how to drive a delivery truck, so she joked that she can add "trucker" to her list of skills.

But, as the old saying goes, when a door closes, a window opens. Now that they were leasing space from a local grower, they had more room to add to their own production schedule. When Jill started at the arboretum, they only grew a small amount of the plants they put in the gardens. She wanted to take on more responsibility and thought that they could handle it, so every year, they started to grow more of their own plants. The Dallas Arboretum went from growing 40,000 plants to more than 320,000 in just five years.

"Once we were successful—and they realized how much money producing your own plants can save—it was pretty easy at that point to do it on our own," Jill said.



Adventures in job switching

After all of the hard work she'd put in to increase production, and train and work alongside the three full-time employees and 15 volunteers on her team, it was bittersweet for Jill to leave the Dallas Arboretum. But she was looking forward to a fresh start with a job that was completely out of her wheelhouse.

Jill had known Leslie Halleck for a few years. Leslie is very well known in the Texas hort world—she also worked at the Dallas Arboretum and at the local IGC chain Calloway's. A few years ago, Leslie went off on her own to start a horticulture consulting company that provides services to the industry, including business strategy and development consulting, company and product branding, digital content marketing and copywriting.

One of Leslie's employees was leaving, so she brought up the possibility of working for Halleck Horticultural to Jill. The proposition was intriguing.

"It just kind of came up organically in conversation," explained Jill. "She said she needed help and I had been kind of thinking about getting out of the physical work and using my brain a little bit more. So I thought a consulting situation would be a really interesting way to do that."

Jill's new role is multi-faceted and that's intentional. Both Leslie and Jill want to be able to mold the job to whatever is needed to help their clients.

"In the beginning, I'm going to be helping out a lot with the consulting and marketing," said Jill. "Leslie also consults on some landscaping projects, so I'll be able to use what I know about plants. And I'll also be doing plant sourcing, which is good because I know where to find them, so she's going to turn over a lot of that stuff to me."

There will be things that she'll miss about not working in a greenhouse or outside in the gardens (smelling Jade Princess Millet and growing brand new plants for the trials area), but there are things that were easy to say good-bye to as well (the heat and spiders).

"I'm the type of person who thinks things through from beginning to end, so having the ability to manipulate a crop—have it start from nothing to the end product—I think I'll probably miss that," Jill admitted. "But I know I'll gain in other ways; it'll just be a different product I'm producing."

A Gen X brain in a Millennial body

When our three Young Grower finalists are chosen, they're tasked with writing an essay that we publish in the June issue of GrowerTalks. In hers, Jill said that she's always felt like she was born in the wrong generation. As a 33-year-old, she's technically a Millennial, but she said she thinks she's a Gen Xer "through and through." I asked her why.

"I'm kinda wired differently than a lot of the younger people I meet," she said matter-of-factly. "I've never relied on anyone else; I always just believed in myself and figured things out for myself. I never needed as much direction. And while I am a people person, and I can turn it on when I want to, I'm more of a solitary person. So I think that depending-on-myself quality goes back to more of a Gen Xer than a Millennial."

The fact that she eases into the role of mentor whenever she trains a new employee or young up-and-comer could be the reason why she's mature beyond her years. At the Dallas Arboretum, she trained dozens of people during her eight-year tenure—especially since there was a bit of a revolving door with regard to staff. (As you know, not everyone is cut out for greenhouse work.)

She's also given presentations at local schools, garden clubs and on local and national television. One of Jill's most memorable mentoring moments was when her friend Susan Morgan (who was the one who nominated Jill for the Young Grower Award) was teaching a vocational program for resettled refugees. Jill helped Susan when Catholic Charities placed them to work at the Dallas Arboretum. Susan said that Jill worked with them, taking the time to mentor and encourage them. Most of the refugees were from war-torn countries like Iran, Iraq, Somalia, Afghanistan and the Congo, and had escaped horrible situations. It was a very moving and eye-opening experience for Jill.

"You hear these stories about where they come from and what they had gone through just to get here and work for \$10 an hour. And you think, 'Why would I ever complain about anything in my life?'" she said. "They would come out to the greenhouse and they did rotations in the garden and I just loved watching them. Something was clicking and they were feeling at home and happy—it's just the coolest feeling. It makes you thankful for where you grew up and the things that you have because it can be taken away so easily."

New roads

With Jill's new job, she and her husband Brett hope to have more time to travel, watch college basketball and attend concerts. It will also allow her to learn new skills while using her experiences at the Dallas Arboretum. From there, the possibilities are endless—which is a whole new path for a regimented person who's used to following something from start to finish.

"A couple of years ago, if you asked me about my goals, I had a really cut-and-dried answer," said Jill. "I knew exactly what I was doing. I know Leslie is open to me taking risks to go where I want to go, so I kind of just want to get my feet under me and understand what consulting can entail."

"Now that I have a fancy award maybe people will think I know what I'm talking about," she said, laughing.

Jill is also hoping she'll have more time to dedicate to her side business. During her college years, she made flower arrangements for a couple of weddings and took courses in floral design. From there, she created Platinum Petals. For the last three years, Jill has worked to move her business forward. So far this year, she's already done about 20 weddings.

"I realized I needed a creative outlet, so I thought I would try it out and it kind of just grew from there," said Jill. "This year is really going strong and it's been really, really fun. It's a whole other avenue of horticulture and floriculture that I get to see. You catch people at their most happy time of their life." (So she hasn't run into Bridezillas yet. Go to Jill's website—platinumpetalsfloral.com—if you're in the Dallas area.)

Interestingly, after 13 years, Jill is the first person from a botanic garden to win the Young Grower Award. But just because she worked for a non-profit doesn't mean what she did at the Dallas Arboretum is any less

impressive than what previous winners have done—maybe it's even more so because other businesses don't rely on donations and their budget isn't as slim.

Jill's self-motivating personality has been like a GPS while she's navigated through her professional life. And she's excited that this new job opportunity will lead her toward interesting experiences and more ways to advance in our industry.

Like Robert Frost said in his famous poem, sometimes taking life's less-traveled road makes all the difference. **GT**