

GROWERTALKS

Cover Story

9/1/2021

Teacher, Mentor, Risk-Taker

Jennifer Zurko

Photography by Hank Davis



To recognize excellence in education, teachers get a Golden Apple Award. In our little world, excellence in horticulture is rewarded with being chosen as the winner of our Young Grower Award.

But, if you ask me, Maddie Maynor would qualify for both. She's not only shown what a great grower manager she is for North Creek Nurseries with her leadership skills, but also her ability to serve as a teacher, passing on what's she's learned to her staff.

For someone who thought her career path would go a very different way, Maddie is extremely flexible and opportunistic—in a good way! When a new challenge comes her way, whether it's professional or personal, she meets it head on, willing to take any risks that will allow her to grow as a person, as a manager and as a teacher.

Risk-taking

Maddie has been living in Pennsylvania for nine years, but her slight southern drawl tells you she's not from around there. Originally from North Carolina, Maddie was raised by parents with ag/hort backgrounds. Her mother recently retired as the Curator of Horticulture at the North Carolina Zoo and Maddie has fond memories of growing up behind the scenes at the zoo. Her father is a forester and works caring for the trees and fighting wildfires, so Maddie's childhood was mostly spent outdoors among animals, plants and trees.

Her experiences at the zoo piqued her interest in pursuing a career in public horticulture, but when she started

college, she majored in History Education. It wasn't long before she realized that she was meant to be around plants and nature, so she switched to Ornamental Horticulture. Sandhills Community College, where she was attending, requires students in its hort program to do an internship after graduation, so Maddie earned a spot as an intern at Longwood Gardens in Kennett Square, Pennsylvania, which actually turned into something more permanent.

"I originally came up here to work at Longwood for an internship that was supposed to be for a year in greenhouse production. And then I just never left," said Maddie, laughing. "I have a fiancé and we recently bought a house—I don't think I'm going anywhere anytime soon. I didn't plan to stay up here, but it just kind of worked out that way."

Maddie was at Longwood Gardens for four years, working as a full-time grower on things like the Thousand Bloom Project. But soon there was an itch to do something different. The opportunity to work at North Creek Nurseries in Landenberg came up and she took it.

"I wanted a little more risk," admitted Maddie. "In public horticulture, it's very artsy and I tend to lean that way, but I wanted just a little bit more motivation, a little bit of risk, a faster paced kind of environment."

At North Creek, owner Tim McGinty (who was also the one who nominated Maddie for the Young Grower Award) has a Section Grower position open at all times to help bring new blood into the business. Many North Creek employees start out as a Section Grower, moving to other positions, depending on their ability and growth. Maddie was a Greenhouse Production Coordinator, where she interfaced with the growers and production, which then earned her the current title of Growing Operations Manager, overseeing the growing and IPM department.

During the last four and a half years, Maddie has been in this role, managing a department of nine people responsible for 320,716 sq. ft. over two locations. North Creek specializes in producing perennial liners from many forms—from seed and cuttings to tissue culture and bare root—and when the production team is done with the beginning stages, it goes to Maddie's group to finish the job. North Creek has a wide customer base, but most of what they produce (Maddie estimates about 70%) goes to horticulture markets (other growers, finished growers, IGCs, public gardens, universities) and about 30% to the landscape market.

Teaching

For Maddie, learning to manage people has been an effort of trial-and-error and she said, "I've definitely made mistakes." When you have a bunch of different personalities working on the same team toward the same goal, it can be daunting, especially when you're dealing with your own responsibilities. But lessons from past experiences, a focus on open communication and passing on her knowledge has helped Maddie craft a management style she can be proud of.

"I just try to be very honest with [my staff] and listen to them," she said. "You do have to specialize for what people are good and not so good, and then play onto those strengths and weaknesses. And then every time you bring in a new person, it changes the entire dynamic, so you must re-configure how you manage the team as a whole. Then just giving each person individual attention and care, and making sure that they feel like they're focused and have that team mentality when they all come together."

For many people, managing people provides more personal and professional growth. Maddie's original plan was to go into teaching, and although she may have switched paths, that teaching mentality has never left her psyche.

"I didn't really see myself being a manager, and as hard as it's been, I really enjoy the teaching aspect of it," she said. "Having the growers come in, not even having growing experience, and watching them turn into the growers they are and really becoming themselves. I enjoy the teaching part [of being a manager], so I hope that never changes."

Maddie mentioned something that fellow Young Grower finalist Diego Barahona said during dinner at Cultivate'21.

"Like what Diego said, 'We grow people,' and as a manager, I just want them to be set up, satisfied and fulfilled. Everything I do is to make their jobs better."

One of the ways Maddie does this is by bringing in outside "education," like speakers and technical reps from suppliers, to help her team learn about new products and processes. She said she likes learning beside her staff and it's nice to hear someone else play the role of teacher, bringing in innovative ideas and thought processes once in a while.

"I really just want to give them as much information as possible," said Maddie. "I want them to network. I want them to feel like they're adding value. I don't want them to be bored. I'm always focused on that because if they're passionate, they're going to take care of the plants, and thus take care of the company."

Mentoring

It's hard not to notice how motivated and driven a person Maddie is. She fully admits that she's always striving to "escape the mundane," as she puts it. This is based on a guiding principle she's read about called "Building Your Life Résumé," which isn't just about developing your professional life, but about how you make your mark in your personal relationships as well.

"You're here one time," said Maddie. "So what can you do personally, work-wise, family-wise to build that résumé and have this whole list of things that you've accomplished and are proud of?"

"I just like to keep it interesting and create excitement within the mundane. I don't want to be bored at work or in life. Yeah, it's kind of the same thing every year, but you have to keep it fun for everyone. Just to create some excitement within the day-to-day."

Things were definitely interesting during the last two seasons, when the staff was navigating through the COVID-19 pandemic. During all of the craziness, it allowed Maddie and her team to learn a little bit more about themselves—like how to adapt and be as flexible as possible.

"Every day was changing and we had to be quick on our feet about decisions," said Maddie. "If we made a decision, sticking with it, even if it seemed bad in the beginning. Being able to jump between different ideas and thoughts and paths. Looking at the big picture and knowing that we are moving in the right direction, but also knowing we'll have to make adjustments along the way."

The last two seasons have been very successful for North Creek, but Maddie knows that the high stress and high pressure is the perfect environment for burnout, so she's worked hard to keep morale high.



"I've been trying every now and then to say, 'Hey guys, let's go get some ice cream,'" she said. "Or 'I'm going to Starbucks—let me pick up something for you.' Just little notions of kindness to show them that we do appreciate what they're doing and as a collective group we're in this together."

One of the people Maddie credits for her professional growth as a manager is Tim. As a former hockey coach who's used to mentoring young people, Maddie says Tim directs his employees with a goal and then empowers them to figure out a way to get there. And she's adopted a very similar management philosophy for the growing team.

"He's really allowed for us to take the lead on things and make our own decisions and I feel valued," she said. "At other places, you can feel like a worker bee. You're told what to do, you go do it. Tim definitely uplifts his staff to make decisions, to add value, no matter where you are within the company. Everyone can add value and everyone's opinion matters."

"A lot of the middle management is under 35 at North Creek. It's great to work with a group of younger people because sometimes we have no idea what we're doing, but we're given the reins to figure it out, knowing that Tim will be there to guide us if we need it."



Interesting

Other ways Maddie escapes the mundane is to pursue activities and hobbies that are... let's say... atypical. A practicing vegan, Maddie has been on a plant-based diet for four years. She's always been a long-distance runner, but recently, she started racing in triathlons with a group of people in her neighborhood.

Pictured: Clockwise from the top: Ben Wolfe, Christina Ziegler, Cindy Goss, Courtney Knight, Maddie, Rose Daly, Charles Ufford and Kassie Garris. In the middle is Francisco Castillo.

But that's not what's unusual—a lot of people run marathons. But as we spoke for this article, Maddie was in the middle of training for her first Ironman event in mid-September, which involves swimming 2.4 miles, biking 112 miles and then running a 26-mile marathon. She estimates it will probably take about 12 to 13 hours of racing. Not everyone can say they've done an Ironman because the training is brutal. When we talked, she was training 16 to 21 hours a week.

"I might not see this article because I might die!" she joked.

When she's not training for a marathon or Ironman, Maddie grows a very large vegetable garden with every edible you can think of, including microgreens. She brews her own kombucha. And she likes to sign up for what she calls "random, obscure activities." She recently joined a week-long work crew to learn how to build a cob house, which is an eco home made out of clay and mud. And in early August, she took a trip to a research station in the Bahamas to learn about tropical fish.

I told Maddie that if she's ever talking to a stranger and there's a lull in the conversation, she can just pick a random thing that she's done and tell them all about it. Not everyone has stories to tell like she does.

"I just like to keep it fun. Build that life résumé and keep it interesting," she said.

She and her fiancé Sean met while they were both working at Longwood Gardens, but what's interesting is that his parents and grandparents also met while they worked there. He's not crazy enough to do triathlons with her, but he's

a good supporter, she says. And they love to travel to national parks and other places where they can go backpacking.

Young Grower Award is brought to you by:



Maddie's career path may look different from what she originally envisioned, but with her high-energy, risk-taking personality, I just couldn't see her standing in a classroom day after day. And she's lucky that she knew that early on. Walking the tightrope of growing plants where anything can go wrong seems to be much more her speed.

If you congratulate her on winning the Young Grower Award, don't be surprised if she's quick to point out that it was a team effort. Her immediate reaction of modesty makes her all the more interesting.

"When I found out [I was a finalist], I was so excited for myself, but part of me wished I could give it to my team because it does represent them," she said. "I might be the face of it, but I wouldn't be here without all of the members of the growing team. They helped create who I am." **GT**