

A Feel-Good Moment With a Poignant Personal Note

GREEN & GROWING

When Choosing a Career, Pay Attention to Personality, Motivation

By Kathy Connolly
Special to Living

The opening line on a recent email was simple but powerful.

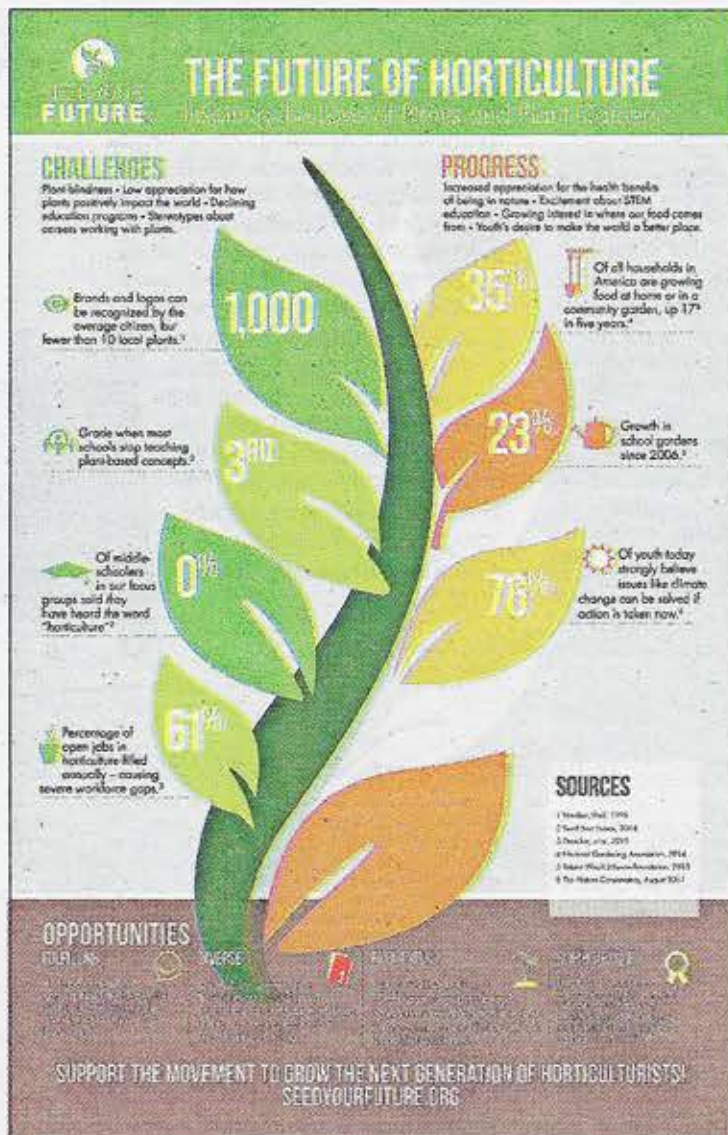
"Hello, my name is Katherine. I am looking to gain experience in ecological landscape design, planning, and implementation, as this is my eventual career goal." The writer explained that she had moved to New London. She was a recent college grad in international studies, which led her to the topic of food security. Her interest in that topic caused her to learn about permaculture. Eager to learn more, she enrolled in the Master Gardener program.

Our email conversation continues, and I predict she'll go far. It's a feel-good moment for me, but it is not without a poignant personal note.

In June 1975, I was a recent graduate of Penn State's English program. One day after graduation, I was riding across campus on my squeaky three-speed bicycle when I happened upon an event at the agriculture school. In the greenhouses, I saw seas of seedlings preening for sunlight. Outdoors, vegetable trials thrived in neat rows with scientific-looking labels. Outdoors, the scents of a dairy operation added to the effect.

The energy of the place was palpable and, as I rode away, I said to myself: "This is what I should have studied."

I was just a visitor that day. I didn't even know what to call those studies, but a deep connection had begun. I never forgot the moment, but it would be 34 years



before I gave full voice to the whisper. Unfortunately, nothing else in my world led me to discover a career in the landscape except the long passage of time.

A few years later, influenced by the popular professions of the day, I got a graduate degree in business. I worked in software and technology and later landed in a human resource assessment business for more than two decades. There I learned about the difference between personality—our basic wiring—and how we are motivated. Personality and motivation profoundly influence our work choices.

Always sensing I was not in the right line of work, I took the career tests our company administered. It was no surprise that I was not a good candidate for the world of offices, spreadsheets, lengthy meetings, and air-conditioned cubicles. My personality and motivation were more suited to fields such as landscape architecture, plant science, and a variety of related areas.

I didn't know how to find my best place in the work world.

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Learning How to Think About a Landscape

The number of landscape-related courses of study available surprises a lot of people. One that is receiving a lot of attention in our current times is landscape design.

Christine Darnell of Lyme is an adjunct professor of landscape design and horticulture at Naugatuck Valley Community College in Waterbury (www.nv.edu). With an MFA in sculpture from SUNY-Purchase and an M.S. in landscape design from Columbia University, she runs her own design and installation firm, www.christinedarnellgardens.com.

She says that spatial and three-dimensional thinking are critical to the imagining and creating enduring landscapes.

"Learning to see things in a two-dimensional map called 'plan' view is always a stretch at first," says Darnell. "The idea of a 2-D drawing becoming an actual 3-D landscape, with hills and valleys, or ledge and marsh with a house requires a big leap."

She leads students through a series of exercises to help them learn to visualize.

"The result is always a wonderful surprise. Suddenly, the new student is thinking outside the box," she says.

Darnell's students come from a very wide variety of backgrounds.

"I see older students, career changers, and some retirees. But about 75 percent are young people who are interested in getting jobs or increasing their responsibilities in the industry."

In addition to landscape design, she says many have interest in nursery management and propagation.

Like everyone I know in the land-related industries, Darnell says we need more young people to understand the opportunities in horticulture, design, and land care.

"They will take over for us," she says.

—Kathy Connolly

Educational Resources for Plant and Landscape Studies

Horticulture and landscape studies in Connecticut:

- UConn offers two- and four-year degrees in a variety of landscape-related topics. See www.plantscience.uconn.edu.
- Naugatuck Valley Community College offers associates degrees in horticulture. See www.nv.edu.
- Connecticut College offers degrees in botany and ethnobotany. See www.conncoll.edu/sciences.
- Connecticut Nursery and Landscape Association offers an accreditation program: See www.cnla.biz/canp.
- Connecticut Tree Protective Association offer several programs, including Arboriculture 101 at www.ctpa.org/arboriculture-101
- UConn Extension Master Gardener Program: See mastergardener.uconn.edu.

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There was nothing to suggest or encourage that I check out the landscape world. The field did not then have, and still does not have, a high profile in schools, popular media, or society in general. According to Seed Your Future (www.seedyourfuture.org), an industry consortium, the average U.S. citizen can identify more than 1,000 commercial brands and logos, but fewer than 10 local plants. When the group conducted focus groups in schools across the country, zero middle-schoolers said they had heard the word "horticulture."

In some quarters, land-related careers even have a negative image.

Young people like Katherine, the email writer whose story opened this column, too rarely discover the field on their own and follow their interests. Seed Your Future reports that only 61 percent of the average 57,600 annual industry job openings are filled due to lack of qualified candidates. The workforce gap is severe.

If you or anyone you know is unsure about career direction, there's a century of scientific research

behind this complex and important choice. If you like the outdoors, like to grow food, like to preserve native habitats, have an imagination for landscape beauty, like to tend plants, or a host of other interests related to land and plants, there is likely to be a niche for you.

See www.seedyourfuture.org/careers for an extensive listing of horticulture-related careers and how to prepare yourself for them.

If your search is broader than horticulture, take advantage of ONET, a vast collection of free, career-related resources sponsored by the U.S. Department of Labor. Start with the online assessment tools at www.onetcenter.org/tools.html.

I didn't find my way all those years ago. I was not alone in those days, or today. But I did learn how career assessment could help me match my interests with the world of work. Now, I am sharing it with you. Wouldn't it be a beautiful thing if we could all find work we love?

Kathy Connolly is a writer and speaker on horticulture and landscape design from Old Saybrook. Reach her through her website www.SpeakingofLandscapes.com.