

At Your Job: Horticulturalist

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AGE: 43

EDUCATION: I have a bachelor's degree in plant science from Cook College at Rutgers University.

HOMETOWN: Point Pleasant

EMPLOYER: Rutgers Cooperative Extension of Monmouth County in Freehold Township. Although the name Rutgers is in the title, I'm a Monmouth county employee.



JOB DESCRIPTION: I help homeowners with their garden problems and questions. Our agricultural agents work with farms and other commercial agricultural operations. I deal with indoor and outdoor plants — pruning questions, when to plant, plant problems. It also involves identifying insects, which I love. I work on plant pathology, identifying diseases.

You can never know it all; every year is different. But I know what's going on out there before a lot of people, because everything comes through my desk. This month, for instance, we just started getting these worms popping up by the thousands on people's driveways and patios. We just found out they're crane fly larvae. We've never seen them before. We think it's weather-related, but we're not sure.

Usually, when you get one or two weird things, you know more are going to come.

HOW DID YOU GET YOUR JOB? I always loved plants and gardening. I didn't know what I was going to do when I went to college, but then I saw the greenhouses at Cook and they really intrigued me. I'm lucky, because this is not only my job; it's my hobby. I was never one to want to carry a briefcase to work.

I always wanted to be an agricultural agent, but you need a master's degree for that, and I don't have one. So, I found there was an opening for a horticulturalist here and I put my name in. I had been working before that as a horticulturalist at Thompson & Morgan, which is a seed catalog company in Jackson. I enjoyed that, because I did problem-solving for people all over the United States. I liked that job, but I wanted to get out of private industry and into public work, and I liked focusing on more than seeds.

SALARY AFTER FIVE YEARS: \$30,000 to \$50,000 a year.

WHAT IS A TYPICAL DAY LIKE? We give a lot of recommendations over the phone. Just to make sure we know what the problem is, we usually ask people to bring in a sample, unless it's an obvious problem. So, we're dealing with people over the counter, on the phone and over the Internet. It's a lot of trouble shooting.

I've been here over eight years, so by now, I know what to expect. But there's always a few problems I have no idea about. Then, we do some research on it. If I can't figure it out, I recommend the people bring the plants to a diagnostic lab at Rutgers. Then, I get a copy of the report, so I'll know what it is in the future.

We see bedbugs. We see ticks. We see houseplant problems. People right now are deciding what to grow in their vegetable gardens in the spring, so people are asking questions about that.

Usually, people don't call in until there's a problem. The hardest problems are when it's a cultural problem with the plant. With an insect problem or a disease, it's easy; you look at it and you're done with it. But if it's a plant in the wrong spot, or it wasn't planted correctly, you have to ask a lot of questions to get the answers out of people.

If they have a rhododendron planted in full sun and they're watering it every day, and it's a clay soil so it's sitting in water, that thing is toast. So, I give them suggestions for better things to plant in that area, or I'll tell them to turn off their sprinkler system. With turf, that's what I wind up saying the most. Turf will get a disease very easily, especially if it's being watered a lot. Watering it every day is the worst thing you can do for turf, because you're encouraging shallow roots. I water my grass only if we haven't had rain in about 10 days.

I also run the master gardener program for Monmouth County, so right now I'm getting the classes put together. I also train other master gardeners to help with our hot line. When we're in high gear in the spring and summer, we get constant calls.

WHAT DO YOU LIKE ABOUT YOUR JOB? I get to work with people and plants; those are two things I like being around. I like that I get to help people out with their problems. People get very emotional about plants.

WHAT DO YOU DISLIKE ABOUT YOUR JOB? The only problem is how crazy-busy it gets in the spring; I wish everybody would get their soil tested in the winter, so there wouldn't be a mad rush.

Sometimes, people want me to work miracles, but usually I have to give last rites in those cases. Sometimes, you just have to give up. But people are very thankful for whatever information we can give them.

SUGGESTIONS FOR OTHER PEOPLE CONSIDERING THIS TYPE OF WORK: Definitely go to college. Try to get as much practical experience as you can. For example, you can volunteer at Deep Cut Horticulture Park in Middletown. Right out of college, I was a horticulturalist at Manasquan River Golf Club for five years. I learned so much there, because I was out in the field every day.