

“The Traveling Apprentice” Works for Greenstreet Gardens

It’s spring. You’re in a nursery buying plants for your garden. And you’re wondering why nursery plants are always hearty, perfectly shaped, and profusely laden with brilliant flowers while every plant you start from a seed or a cutting ends up looking like a wind-ravaged hurricane survivor.

The answer-- as I learned from Ray Greenstreet, owner of Greenstreet Growers in Lothian-- is simple: Take one 70,000 sq. ft. state-of-the-art green house equipped with the latest and greatest innovations in growing technology. Add twenty-one additional Quonset style greenhouses equipped to execute precise conditions of watering, heat, and humidity. Mix in knowledge gleaned from a study of horticulture, throw in years of experience, and blend with an inordinate amount of time and labor.

Simple, right? Before my Traveling Apprentice assignment was over I would learn just how “un-simple” that recipe really is.

It was Monday morning and deliveries of seeds and cuttings from all over the world were being received and logged in-- cuttings that just the previous Friday morning began their day somewhere else in the world, attached to a mother plant. The kiddies were barely awake when they were rudely snipped from their mother, carefully placed in specialized shipping boxes, rushed to an airport and flown round the world to an FDA inspection site in Florida before FedEx sped them on their way to Greenstreet, where they would be stuck into potting soil by that Monday afternoon.

In a Quonset greenhouse I worked sticking these world-traveled cuttings into flats of specialized starter soil. In another greenhouse I joined other workers in snipping the top leaves off plants that had taken root and were now 3-4 inches tall.

Top-snipping at this point would encourage side growth on the plant. Snipping off too much, however, could damage the plant so I snipped slowly and cautiously, while the scissors of my experienced co-workers kept up a rhythmic pattern of snip, snip, snips.

A manager had advised me to wear layered clothing because I would be in-and-out of buildings all day long, so I’d bundled up well. Now I found myself sweltering in the steamy humidity of the greenhouses. Over time I began slipping out of my outer layers like a snake shedding its skin. With each discarded layer I observed my co-workers shooting nervous, furtive glances in my direction. Now I was down to just one outer wear before the silk thermal undergarments were revealed, I was still burning up, and the other workers were looking noticeably apprehensive. I was contemplating my next move when, fortunately, a manger saved me from any impropriety by scurrying me on to my next assignment.

In the office I created shipping labels for plants to be transported from Greenstreet Growers to nurseries and wholesalers across the U.S. I ended the day in the Gift Shop, which offers everything from outdoor living furniture to a Vera Bradley collection, and more. From snipping plants to inventorying a Vera Bradley collection--not exactly your average, run-of-the-mill apprenticeship. But just another day at work for the staff at Greenstreet Growers.

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The Traveling Apprentice is a monthly column written by Carolyn McHugh, President/CEO of the Calvert County Chamber of Commerce. Each month Carolyn spends a day working for a Chamber member, then writes a column for a local newspaper about the experience. The article is later inserted into Chamber’s newsletter and posted on the Chamber’s web-site in order to give the maximum exposure to the Chamber member. Her commitment to Chamber members and to the readers is that she’s there for Chamber members and that whatever they do in their daily job, she’ll do, too.