

hi phillip it's great to talk to you today hey
kyra and caroline uh thanks
0:05
for having me on thanks for being here yeah
a little bit about me my name is philip evish
0:11
um i was born and raised in frederick
maryland it's about an hour west of dc
0:18
where i'm currently living i'm 25 years old
and
0:23
in january 2021 i started a new job it's titled
pathways horticulturist
0:31
at the smithsonian institute within the
smithsonian gardens museum
0:36
pathways position is basically four recent
graduates in order to apply to be
0:41
a pathways horticulturist you had to be two
years or less out from
0:46
your undergraduate degree in horticulture
since it's a horticultural job
0:51
did you always know what you wanted to do
like from early on middle school high school
age
0:57
definitely not i was not one of those kids
who had like one career goal
1:02
that i wanted to achieve i have noticed
throughout my life that i've always been
interested in a lot of different things
1:09
at one point in middle school it was like
being an optometrist then it went to being
an architect
1:15

then it probably went to psychology and
journalism and history and it was
1:21
everything and when i went to college i went
to university of maryland in college park
1:27
and i started as a psych major and lasted
that for about a semester and
1:33
i was like quickly realizing that it wasn't for
me i switched to journalism at that point
1:38
because like writing is fun and you get to
explore a lot of different topics that you're
interested in and then i quickly learned that i
also didn't want
1:45
to do that and the biggest question for me
in college came about just food
1:50
and healthy eating i grew up kind of
1:55
not eating the healthiest and my health
reflected that diet and
2:00
as like a 18 year old i was like it's maybe it's
about time that i take my health into my
own hands you
2:06
know i'm going into school college and
maybe this is like a sign of maturity that i
can like you know maybe lose some
2:13
weight or not eat junk food all the time and
as i was pondering those questions
2:18
it really just came down to food is plants
like in its most raw form
2:24
and i was like that's pretty cool if like if
eating healthy means eating plants what is
it about plants that's so

2:31
magical and i really just wanted to get to the
bottom of that question
2:38
and for me just the logical way to turn was
to study horticulture i switched my
2:43
degree my sophomore year of college which
i think for for younger
2:48
college students i almost like encourage
you to change your degree or like ask
questions
2:54
that are going to like kind of scare you
because i i found personally that when i was
3:01
recognizing things that i didn't know it made
learning so much easier rather than
3:06
having a career goal in my mind like i want
to be x y or z and these are the like exact
steps i need to take to get
3:12
there it was really just like what do i not
know and like what am i genuinely curious
about and that was horticulture
3:18
there's so much to do in horticulture and i
think like
3:23
as i discovered that as a student in college
and doing internships throughout the
3:29
process i was like wow like i could easily do
this for the rest of my life and never be
bored because you can just
3:37
do so many things like i have so much
respect for the liberal sciences and things
that are
3:44

more esoteric and philosophical like i spent
a ton of class time in those types
3:49
of environments as well but to put in my
summer internship experiences
3:56
where i was managing a farm in dc
columbia heights green is a community
4:01
farm basically in a quarter acre in this
abandoned lot in the heart of columbia
4:07
heights i was able to lead that farm for
about two seasons in
4:12
2017 and then 2018 i graduated in 2018 so i
was kind of doing both summers
4:19
there and really it was just it was a great
opportunity to
4:24
practice farming practice like leading a
large group of volunteers because we could
have
4:30
anywhere from 10 to 50 volunteers per
weekend volunteer hour
4:36
and the cool thing about that farm was you
don't have to be on a waiting list to show up
and participate in the
4:43
farming which is a huge barrier to entry for a
lot of community garden spaces dc
4:49
doesn't have a ton of parks obviously the
national mall downtown is a huge swath of
public land but there isn't a
4:57
place for you to grow anything and so these
tiny quarter acre lots that
5:03

the garden i was working was just really allowed a diverse mix of people to come we could

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all work on a task together you could just show up and anyone who came would just like divvy out the harvest equally

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among all of us and it was a true like communal effort to get a lot done

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and i just learned so much and i was like wow like i could really do this we could all be doing this in small scales

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throughout the city but unfortunately what i realized is people with that working knowledge of farming agriculture

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horticulture it's such a small number of people i mean i graduated with i think six or

5:41

seven people in my entire major and so when you all even asked me to talk about

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this topic i was really excited because now that i have been out of school for

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almost three years and i've been a practicing horticulturist for those three years in different capacities

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i'm learning that like the need to train and like grab people's attention to study horticulture and to get involved

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in this like pathway is so necessary like i said horticulture is massive in

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what you can find yourself doing one summer i interned for a green roofing company in arlington virginia that in

6:18

its own right green roofing was a really intense side to horticulture and

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the nursery industry is a huge section of horticulture that i've only scratched and the thing with

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horticulture too is like it is hard work and i think that is what some people

6:36

reasonably shy away from i know for me personally that's also why i love the career so much is because

6:44

i have that passion for being outside every day i almost don't know how i would function if i if

6:51

i didn't i mean i just know myself and i couldn't work indoors or on my

6:56

computer and i think especially in the context of the pandemic when

7:01

everything was shutting down people had to go and work from home it's like i'm a gardener

7:07

we can't possibly work from home when you were talking about your college experience i heard you say that you

7:13

asked yourself what am i generally curious about and that helped you figure out that pursuing this whole

7:19

horticultural career was something you were interested in well after you ask yourself that question how did you

7:25

approach searching for opportunities to help you pursue that career and what resources did you use

7:32

i think at that point when i was switching my degree

7:37

i only had a curiosity i relied on like the college you know

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the the agricultural college at university of maryland is it's a land-grant university so they have

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networks of farmers and horticulturists and landscape architects and arborists my i was doing

7:57

working on my capstone project directing my work towards like childhood obesity within um the college park area

8:06

and then that work resulted in me partnering with an elementary school and i established like a new

8:12

after-school gardening program with a couple teachers in their third grade class

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and it was just a matter of like i was in a program that gave me the opportunity to

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connect with this local school i identified their needs and then while i was interested i had this interest in

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horticulture but i didn't know anything about it and i kind of just dived into it and i was like i am ready

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to like take on this project and build a garden and like i'll be learning with the kids that i'm going to be teaching

8:43

that spring gardening is an act of doing you can't read about gardening and become a

8:49

gardener and again that's why i would say all of the times you can just involve yourself

8:56

i just looked around i mean i use instagram pretty solidly as a way to network with

9:02

gardeners and with institutions and learning about what small farm is doing over here and

9:09

maybe that seems like silly but i don't think it is i think connecting

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with people in a way that you can like just message a farm in a direct message or

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you know talk like talk to some botanist that you see who's working at harvard like the the doors to

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entry to make connections with people in the field um i have found personally to be really

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just available so in my in my degree at maryland there was this point when i started

9:42

telling people oh i'm like a horticulture student and then people would turn to me and like point to a tree or point to a

9:48

plant and be like oh what's that you study plants and it was getting to be my senior year

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in this degree and i actually still wasn't able to identify things around me

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and i think that plant blindness which is a

10:06

common term used in the field today um of just the general public not knowing

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the the ecosystem of native plants and and invasive weeds that we live in and

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how complex that like relationship is um for a million different reasons but

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basically not having a context to walk around in our world and i don't think that

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naming every plant in latin versus a common name or whatever is

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better that like one isn't better than the other but it's just it's it was forming a relationship with

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really anything around you and again it's like that starting point so if if you know that like the one tree outside

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your window is an oak then that is like the best place to start

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so for me when i finally had that identification course it it began to

11:00

change everything about the rest of my career because i i started to shift from

11:06

agricultural food crops and developed more of an interest in ecology

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native landscapes and ornamental gardening so when i when i graduated

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i took my first job in hawaii working as a horticultural therapist

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and that was an amazing opportunity to not only practice my um

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gardening and like food crop production skills but to do so with teenagers who

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usually usually the kids that i was working with had no outdoor experience some were

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addicted to their cell phones some had you know a lot of different traumas and why students were there was very

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variable but traditionally all of them just had no experience outside so working

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with those students was amazingly rewarding and i learned so much about

12:02

patience and how to make plants interesting to kids who wished to death that they were

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on their instagram and their cell phones and another fascinating part about hawaii is

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80 of their native plants are only found in hawaii

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but unfortunately invasive species have decimated and taken over so much of that native

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habitat so when you look around you're seeing palm trees and coconuts and

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mangoes and avocados bananas all of these plants that we think of when we think hawaii

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but none of them are native unfortunately so i feel like every time i started moving forward as a gardener i

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was equally steeped in the ecology of wherever i happened to be again as a curious person i'm like if i

12:52

moved to california that whole new plants and i could go to another country and i won't

12:57

know anything you know i could be the best gardener in the dc area and i go two hours south and it means

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nothing i mean that's just like how literally temperamental plants are and like they're only going to grow in

13:09

certain regions and that that challenge to me is just like so exciting it's just

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and it again it's humbling it's such a humble field because when people do think they know everything you can

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easily just be like no you don't please stop definitely um how did you

13:26

find out about the opportunity in hawaii that's so far away it just seems like

13:33

a crazy place like right after college like an amazing opportunity but i'm just curious

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i worked for this like adventure program which was like a subdivision of our gym at

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maryland and they would lead backpacking trips and biking trips for students on

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weekends and things like that and a couple of those folks had talked about the program and

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had recommended it and they were like this is like a great sort of right out of college thing there's a lot of young people involved and

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if you're good at facilitating and kind of holding space for folks then it's it's a nice

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um hard place to work it's it's up to you right like if you have the opportunity to be in

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college like i just you can't take that experience for granted college

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especially now is is a different reality and

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life will just keep changing and so just be involved with what you do and like take

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real like curiosity in it for sure yeah definitely i mean

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that's how me and kara even created this podcast because we had been working for smithsonian gardens since 2018

14:45

2019 um and we're supposed to be creating like educational projects to be in the museum

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for visitors to interact with and we had to totally change up our entire

14:56

like plan for the rest of our college career uh to make something online um so

15:02

it's definitely tricky but if you stick to it like eventually we landed on something like this which is amazing but

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i totally agree yeah and i mean like i said this is such a great idea um

15:16

because i think people need to hear about the successes of horticulture and also just realize that there are a ton

15:23

of jobs in this field after hawaii i i felt a little claustrophobic there and

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i was like i'm gonna move and ironically i moved to new york city which is very small

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in size and a lot more people so i don't know why i didn't address my claustrophobia

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but i took the leap and moved there the new york botanic garden had hired me

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as an intern and i worked in their herbarium for the summer of

15:54

2019 i guess and the herbarium again was a totally new field for me

16:01

within plant science and i took the internship because i was like i don't know what this is and i'm curious and

16:07

it's new york city so essentially the herbarium has nothing to do with

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gardening or outdoor work i worked inside their library

16:18

but you'd go out collect a plant literally dry it and then paste it to a piece of paper

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with the plant name who collected it where it was all the details so basically in at the botanical garden

16:32

they just have endless rows and filling cabinets of these specimens and so my

16:37

job that summer was take a folder of dried old plants and take a photo

16:45

of the specimen so basically i was just digitizing these sheets of dried plants

16:51

and then i had the opportunity to write about plants and make the herbarium specimens seem

16:57

cool and like try to tell different stories about different collectors and like women in

17:03

botanical science and different queer artists not artists but queer botanists

17:08

and just you know telling stories through plants is another um big part of my job in a lot of

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different capacities plants are always ingrained with human society and civilization

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and you really can't tell a story about people without the plants that have helped them

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through any context up until today so i applied to

17:32

new york parks and recreation and became a gardener um i started in

17:38
the fall of 2019 on the mobile crew from
manhattan and
17:43
just you know i was pretty new to the city
and i just got to drive around with a crew of
gardeners and visit all these
17:49
different parks throughout the city um do a
bunch of weeding and mulching and
pruning just you know maintaining
17:57
the huge number of parks in manhattan
alone so i did the mobile crew for about
three months
18:03
and i guess i had kind of proved myself and
they were like we have a need for a
gardener at city hall which was in lower
18:09
manhattan and so they stationed me at city
hall and i worked there for a full
18:15
year november 2019 basically through the
entire pandemic
18:20
and i finished up there november 2020. yeah
city hall was an adventure
18:27
with everything that happened last year the
pandemic started and um parks
18:33
remained open gardeners still went into
work and you know that was tough that was
tough to not have a
18:39
lot of guidance at the time and at first i like
almost resented the garden in the park
because i was like
18:46
this isn't fair you know our safety isn't being
taken into consideration right now

18:52
um but then also like two weeks in i was like
you know actually like i can use the garden
as a space to just
18:58
like ground out these feelings and um it
really became like a place of
19:04
solace for me and then because it was the
pandemic not a lot of people were coming
into the park so it was an eight
19:09
acre area and i felt like i basically had it to
myself and then last summer the protesting
that
19:16
happened there was actually a big protest
encampment on the outside of city hall
19:23
and so i was dealing with like the the
politics of that and
19:28
a constant police presence a constant
protest presence that my park being
19:34
locked down almost every other day if not
for weeks straight and here i am as
19:39
like this gardener um i'm like the one person
that is just responsible for
19:45
making it look great for essentially no one i
mean for many weeks last summer no one
could come into my
19:52
park and i'm a public gardener and that's
like why i do my work or at least the time
19:59
that's what i was doing and it just it really
made you i made me question myself and
it's like is this
20:05

the work that i value like why am i putting in all this hard work if no one's gonna see the poppies or the

20:12

black-eyed susans that are blooming in the fall i was able to recruit a

20:18

student intern from nyu and she was like a

20:24

uh assistant gardener essentially she came three days a week and um didn't really have any horticultural

20:31

background she was a great support and i was really happy to

20:38

work with a college student because i was recently out of college and just to have that like relational

20:45

like same level i guess um yeah she she worked with me in the fall

20:51

and then by that time i had put in my application for this pathways smithsonian

20:56

um gardening job like months before that and um as hr takes its time you know i

21:04

finally um got accepted that job in the fall and then transitioned out of new york city

21:11

um and back down to dc and moved here in

21:16

december yeah and have been working i guess for about four months as a horticulturist

21:23

with smithsonian every museum has a curated garden space and i

21:30

think right now as a new employee learning how smithsonian gardens

21:36

differentiates themselves from the museums that everyone like knows and loves has been like a true

21:43

difficult kind of um it's just yeah it's difficult to kind of parse that out

21:50

you know i'm not just showing up to work every day just to prune shrubs it's you know i'm researching i'm learning plants

21:56

i'm thinking about what can go in some empty spaces and how they're going to play in with the other plants and the

22:02

other themes and you're a designer and you're working with color and

22:07

truly like being a gardener and a horticulturist you are an artist my work

22:12

is just how do i relate plants to people even someone who thinks they don't care at all for a plant

22:19

there's a way to tie them back to something and i just see that as a challenge with

22:25

like literally everyone i meet and what a journey you've had i'm just like

22:30

floored by all of the opportunities that you have been able to do since

22:36

graduating college that's amazing i am really

22:41

lucky i rely on my instincts to guide me based on what i'm interested in like i

22:47
one of the big it was hard to leave new york
because i loved that city but what i knew
was that coming to smithsonian
22:52
would be like going back to school learning
hands-on every single day from
22:57
experts in the field everyone is gardening in
a different style has a different background
and
23:04
then that alone those connections are
everything i look around every day and
23:10
i'm like a lot of public spaces they struggle
to find gardeners they struggle to find
people to maintain
23:16
their parks these pockets of ecology really
matter
23:21
because they they feed into like our rivers
and our creeks and our woodlands and
everything is connected whether we
23:27
think so or not plants seeds everything can
travel so fast it's also been so cool to hear
you
23:34
talk about all the opportunities you've
already been able to take advantage of
when it comes to the horticultural field
23:40
in high school i took a horticulture class and
my we were lucky enough to have a
greenhouse and that class mostly
23:47
consisted of talking about like the basics of
horticulture and what i mean by that is like
23:54

propagating maybe grafting and that sort of
thing and we just talked a lot about like
native species i went to high
24:00
school in virginia and it was an amazing
class because i loved plants and my
24:05
teacher was awesome and he had
previously been a landscaper and he's an
24:11
arborist and that was really cool but in high
school i was like okay well i love plants but
like i don't want to be
24:17
an arborist i love plants so i don't really
want to go be a landscaper so it's so cool to
hear you talk about
24:24
all the other opportunities that can be had
like such as like a plant therapist like what
i've never heard of that like
24:30
that's so cool you know and i think it's so
important that people realize that because
when i was in high school hearing
24:36
horticulture i was like oh like okay i have this
image in my head of like
24:42
an older man tending to a garden like i just
couldn't see how that would apply to my life
and my interest but it can it
24:50
really can and that's just so evident through
your experiences it's true i i when i was in
high school
24:55
the horticulture classes were like co-run by
the ffa the future farmers of america
25:01

and as like a naive high schooler i was like
ffa that's like i don't want to be a part of that
that sounds like silly or

25:07

whatever and i mean here i am today as like
a full-time gardener and there's so

25:13

much creativity involved and yeah just
become gardeners

25:19

you're like really convincing me to like
change my entire like college career here we
go caroline

25:24

like let's go like caroline and i are graduating
in three weeks and we're like oh wait a
second

25:30

i'm like mad that you doesn't have a
horticulture program yeah so

25:37

like for people like caroline and i right now
or maybe other people who are towards the
end of their college career

25:43

or who have graduated and they're hearing
your story and are really interested in what
you're doing but haven't they don't

25:50

have a formal horticultural degree like what
would you say to those people are there
certifications available that you

25:55

know of do you have to have a horticulture
degree to do the work you're doing i'd say
first and foremost no you don't

26:02

need a degree in horticulture and i think that
that was kind of a problem with me

26:08

when it came to applying to the smithsonian
because you do need a degree to be a

26:14

horticulturist at smithsonian and that's okay
but i think

26:20

it limits a lot of people who have a lot of
knowledge from other capacities and other
experiences

26:27

what i recommend to people is yes there are
certificate programs you can go to brooklyn
botanic garden nyb or new york

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botanic garden those are two i'm most
familiar with them living in new york city

26:39

that offer you know 30 credit programs and
they're usually like a year and a half or two
where they have like

26:45

classroom and outdoor programming to
finish the program with a certificate

26:51

you are a horticulturist that can stand in for
a degree if if you feel an urge now to learn

26:59

something new i think it's just like engaging
with the material look at things like it
doesn't have to

27:04

be this like program it doesn't have to be
this one set of skills that

27:10

you're now a gardener it's like we're none of
us are gardeners unless we just like practice
it and try it like the

27:17

amount of plants i've killed at my apartment
on my patio in the formal gardens that i'm
responsible for it's

27:23

like that is just gardening like you're gonna kill things you're gonna like think you're doing this beautiful design

27:29

and it looks terrible and i think it's just it's a forgiving field because oh winter comes it's going to

27:35

kill everything anyway and just try again the next year and whether you're just gardening in a couple pots at your

27:41

house or you're volunteering at a garden somewhere just get involved i think a

27:47

lot of people feel relief to know that you've also killed house plants oh yeah

27:55

definitely i'm really bad with um snake plants those like tall striped

28:01

ones i killed my snake plant too and it makes me feel so bad because everyone says that they're the easiest to grow

28:07

right i'm like how do i not do this right i have everything else but [Laughter]

28:13

yeah a big project that caroline and i were doing right before the pandemic um

28:18

we were working on the great indoors exhibit at mpg and like our

28:24

mission was to tell people that like you can go a house plant and like this is how you can do it and like just try

28:31

again and like both of us care so much about that because like being in college and especially now there seems to be a

28:37

huge trend of like filling your home and house or the place you live or the place you work with plants um but people are

28:45

like oh well i kill them so i guess i just have to give up now and like i

28:50

guess i'm not good at plants because you know there's the whole like green thumb thing i guess i just like it it must be

28:55

me you know and i guess to maybe some extent education is important and maybe do some

29:01

research on how to take care of that specific plant but also it's just you know plants aren't perfect

29:06

so things will happen yeah yeah it's it's just knowing that

29:12

you can mess up right yeah and who cares it's not just a plant but it's just a

29:19

plant like yeah it's okay so just like how would you sum up

29:24

horticulture for people who might see that term as i don't know something that they don't

29:30

really know that much about that is probably the toughest question

29:37

in terms of in terms of like why i'm so passionate about trying to get people to care about

29:42

plants and it's horticulture it's also botany you know people confuse those two terms all

29:48

the time like i've been called a botanist and i'm like i'm very much not a botanist like i think it's just like

29:55

it's moving away from the formality that is usually associated

30:01

with gardening and embracing more of like the messiness of it one thing i'm trying to

30:08

brace myself as like working for the smithsonian is i think the name

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smithsonian carries so much weight as like this formal institution you know where like the pinnacle of education and

30:21

knowledge so we have an expectation to do everything the right way the best way

30:27

and i think that can get in the way of doing things a messier way like do we need to um rake

30:36

up all the leaves every year and then blow in dyed hardwood mulch and it's it's it's a cultural thing that

30:44

like a lot of horticulture is embedded in this like older practice with a lot of older folks

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just in general i mean like people who are gardeners are gardeners for a lifetime usually what i've noticed too is

30:59

people come out of the woodworks on instagram to like ask questions and i

31:04

think it's and a lot of people are like wow i've like never thought of this or i've seen this flower outside my

31:09

apartment every day and i never knew what it was called and like that is a win for me it really is um and just

31:19

making volunteering more accessible like that's why last summer when i brought my friends down to city hall

31:24

i was like bring anyone you want like i don't care if you've never touched a plant before like we will find a place

31:31

for you to fit in i love that you use like your personal platform to talk about this because i

31:36

think when people see oh well at least when i see other passionate people i'm like oh my gosh

31:41

that's so cool and then i take the time to read it kind of no matter what what the topic is it's just great to hear um

31:49

from other passionate people so to anyone who's listening phil needs you

31:56

join phil yeah we all we all need you i mean the world the world needs

32:02

us because you know the planet and the plants want it it's all we have and

32:09

they they can easily just not be here and we lose species every day and plants don't have the pr that animals do

32:16

if you hear that the pandas are going extinct everyone's going to be like not the pandas but like we lose plant

32:22

species by like the tens if not hundreds every single day and there's just not like a care enough
32:29
or like money behind botany programs to like go conserve these species and things like that
32:36
yeah and i feel like it's like one of the most hands-on paths you could take if like
32:42
sustainability has been such a big thing in recent years like i know i took an environmental science in high school and
32:48
like everyone was really into like reducing reusing recycling all that kind of stuff but like it doesn't really like
32:55
that like horticulture and gardening is such like a small thing that you can do that really changes stuff but besides
33:02
like environmental science we didn't have any like botany programs any horticulture programs in my high school and i almost wish that we did because i
33:08
feel like a lot more people would have been interested in it when you can tell powerful stories about plants through a
33:15
human framework that's like what sells them and you know right now i'm i'm writing up a lot of
33:21
instagram posts for native plant month that you'll see on the the smithsonian gardens page and if i was just like
33:28
bachelor is a native plant that is a you know birch tree that grows next to

33:35
rivers like if that was all i said about it no one is going to care and it's like how
33:40
have you know river birches been used in eastern north america for hundreds if not thousands of years
33:47
it's like who was using them what are like why are they important what you know those
33:52
you just gotta do the work you gotta do the research and um that's what makes my job so multifaceted
33:58
and i get to learn about people at the same time i feel like we could talk forever
34:04
looking at my it's like yeah we hit everything yet
34:10
there's so much to talk about but hopefully there'll be a season two and we can continue the conversation in
34:17
season two thanks so much phil yeah nice to meet you both take care see you later
34:25
the garden gate was created by kira berba and caroline mcdonald as part of the learning by leading initiative with
34:30
the smithsonian gardens this team includes emily warsha as the education specialist
34:36
jenna you as the marketing specialist nicollette kelly as the recording assistant and megan hastie as the audio
34:44

engineer the music is by royalty-free music
on soundcloud special thanks to cynthia
brown and

34:50

paula healy learn more by visiting
gardens.si.edu thanks for listening

35:04