

[Music]  
0:12  
welcome to the garden gate project a  
0:14  
podcast where we talk to professionals  
0:15  
across many fields who work directly and  
0:17  
indirectly with fans in our natural  
0:19  
world  
0:20  
we're students at american university in  
0:22  
washington dc and interns at the  
0:24  
smithsonian gardens  
0:26  
we created this project with the hopes  
0:28  
of inspiring a new generation to make  
0:30  
sustainable and meaningful change in our  
0:33  
world  
0:34  
i'm mckenna freedman i'm kat ryano and  
0:36  
i'm annie berlin  
0:38  
in this podcast we'll be talking with  
0:40  
stephanie difestano  
0:43  
stephanie di stefano is the ground  
0:45  
operations manager for american  
0:47  
university  
0:48  
[Music]  
1:01

thanks for joining the podcast can we  
1:03  
start off with your name and your  
1:05  
education  
1:06  
hi i'm stephanie destefano and i went to  
1:09  
university of maryland  
1:10  
and got a degree in horticulture and  
1:12  
graduated in 1980 from there also i work  
1:16  
at american university and i can take  
1:19  
classes for free so i got a master's in  
1:21  
anthropology while i've been here okay  
1:24  
could you explain like what you do at  
1:26  
american sure on the grounds operations  
1:28  
manager so  
1:30  
that involves overseeing all the staff  
1:32  
that take care of our gardeners on  
1:34  
campus we're a certified arboretum and  
1:38  
have a tree inventory and i work with  
1:40  
our two landscape architects that we  
1:42  
have to manage the grounds and make sure  
1:45  
that we keep everything horticulturally  
1:48  
taken care of and  
1:50

all aspects of caring for the landscape  
1:53  
and the grounds including snow removal  
1:55  
in the winter unfortunately but that  
1:57  
kind of goes with the territory  
1:59  
what are you doing now and how did you  
2:01  
get there like just like of how you  
2:03  
chose your career horticulture and how  
2:07  
you came to america  
2:08  
okay i chose my career actually when i  
2:11  
was in high school i was never  
2:15  
a big fan of sitting in the classroom  
2:18  
staying inside i'm a very outdoors  
2:21  
person  
2:22  
i like to be active not to sit around  
2:25  
and look at a computer or well back when  
2:27  
i was in college they not really didn't  
2:29  
have too many computers but i just  
2:31  
always wanted to be outside so high  
2:33  
school was really hard for me because  
2:35  
you know i had to sit inside so long and  
2:38  
just you know was just always anxious to  
2:40

get out of there so i signed up for a  
2:42  
horticulture class and it was really  
2:45  
different from any other class i'd taken  
2:47  
they had a greenhouse got to walk around  
2:50  
and talk and get our hands dirty and  
2:54  
you know do something hands-on which is  
2:56  
much more my style and what i like so i  
2:59  
decided right then when i was in 11th  
3:01  
grade that's where i was going to major  
3:02  
in when i went to college and so  
3:05  
university of maryland has a good  
3:06  
horticulture program  
3:08  
and when i graduated from maryland i was  
3:11  
really lucky to get a part-time seasonal  
3:15  
position with the cooperative extension  
3:17  
service in  
3:18  
prince george's county and i worked with  
3:20  
two  
3:21  
extent changes there  
3:23  
taking phone calls from  
3:25  
people  
3:26

you know that had questions about  
3:28  
their trees and landscape and that sort  
3:31  
of thing so i learned a tremendous  
3:32  
amount from them because i worked with  
3:34  
them like through march 2 like october  
3:37  
google whole season so when people  
3:39  
called about problems with the landscape  
3:42  
it was very seasonal like if they called  
3:44  
in april they were all calling about 10  
3:46  
caterpillars in the trees and one needs  
3:48  
to know what to do about those and it  
3:50  
just moved on through the season and  
3:52  
you'd get different calls about  
3:54  
different insect problems or how to grow  
3:57  
certain things and so i learned a  
3:58  
tremendous amount from them  
4:00  
and then i was lucky getting another  
4:02  
seasonal part-time job with the national  
4:05  
arboretum in dc  
4:07  
so i worked there  
4:09  
like a season so from right when i left  
4:11

the extension service i went to the  
4:14  
national arboretum and i learned a whole  
4:16  
bunch of stuff there i got to  
4:18  
work with the different curators of the  
4:20  
different collections the boxwood  
4:23  
collection the israeli collection  
4:25  
the herb garden where i met holly  
4:28  
shimizu who  
4:30  
had been like the director of  
4:32  
u.s botanic gardens her last career  
4:35  
before she retired but we kind of stayed  
4:37  
lifelong friends from doing that  
4:40  
but i learned yeah a whole lot from  
4:42  
there i learned about taking care of  
4:44  
aquatic plants they have  
4:46  
water lilies and fish and i learned all  
4:49  
kinds of stuff about that and  
4:51  
now i have a really nice pond at my  
4:53  
house so i know how to take care of pond  
4:55  
plants and that was fun and then i  
4:58  
worked for a garden center for  
5:00

three years where i um you know sold  
5:02  
plants to homeowners and answered lots  
5:05  
of plant questions and that sort of  
5:06  
thing  
5:07  
um then that garden center actually  
5:10  
closed down because they lost their  
5:12  
lease on the land so i had to leave  
5:14  
there and i got a job i was just like  
5:17  
browsing through the paper and we ran  
5:19  
across this random job at leisure world  
5:22  
which is a huge retirement community  
5:24  
and it was they were asking for a  
5:26  
grounds manager  
5:27  
so i applied for that and got that job  
5:30  
and so i  
5:31  
it's like a 600 acre property  
5:34  
and i got a job overseeing the  
5:36  
contractor that took care of all the  
5:38  
landscaping and interacting with all the  
5:40  
homeowners regarding what they wanted to  
5:43  
see in the landscape but they had  
5:44

questions that they complained she had  
5:46  
the problems whatever i was kind of the  
5:48  
go-between  
5:49  
so i was there for 18 years and then i  
5:53  
was a member  
5:54  
was and still am a member of multiple  
5:57  
professional organizations like  
5:59  
professional grounds management society  
6:02  
the  
6:03  
international society of agora culture  
6:04  
i'm a certified arborist  
6:06  
but  
6:07  
through my membership with the  
6:08  
professional grounds management society  
6:10  
i met the person who was my boss here at  
6:13  
american university was also a member of  
6:15  
that organization so um from  
6:18  
leisureworld i went i came to american  
6:20  
through that contact through that  
6:22  
professional organization and i've been  
6:25  
here almost 20 years only 20 years in  
6:27

april  
6:28  
so  
6:31  
what was the best thing you did to get  
6:33  
where you are today  
6:34  
i would say  
6:36  
joining professional organizations is  
6:40  
really important  
6:41  
and i mean i i don't think that students  
6:44  
realize that they can join the  
6:47  
professional organizations and often  
6:49  
there's free or very discounted  
6:52  
rates for students to join  
6:55  
organizations like the professional  
6:57  
grounds management society or the  
6:59  
american public gardens association  
7:02  
or international society of arbor  
7:03  
culture and they also almost all of them  
7:06  
offer  
7:08  
grants or scholarships or that sort of  
7:10  
thing to offer incentives for students  
7:14  
to  
7:15

go into the  
7:17  
landscape or sustainability or public  
7:19  
garden field because there's just a lot  
7:22  
a lot of people don't realize how many  
7:23  
opportunities that there are in public  
7:26  
gardens and universities and when i went  
7:29  
to school in horticulture like i had no  
7:30  
idea where i was going to end up so  
7:33  
just interesting but a lot of networking  
7:36  
and just  
7:37  
being around other professionals that  
7:39  
have the same interest as you i think  
7:41  
provides a good network for when you're  
7:43  
niche or finding a job or whatever what  
7:46  
piece of advice would you give high  
7:48  
school students to college students who  
7:50  
are interested in the agriculture field  
7:52  
like i just said try to interact with  
7:54  
some professional organizations don't be  
7:57  
afraid to reach out to  
7:59  
professionals that are in the field are  
8:01

doing something that you're interested  
8:02  
in most college professors love to talk  
8:05  
to people and there are office hours and  
8:08  
sit there bored nobody comes to see them  
8:11  
so i mean i think just reaching out to  
8:13  
people that are doing interesting things  
8:14  
then most of them would love to just  
8:16  
talk your air off and let tell you  
8:18  
everything that they love about what  
8:20  
they do  
8:21  
so i think just trying to  
8:24  
reach out to different people and learn  
8:26  
as much as you can is um the good way to  
8:30  
decide you know what bats you want to  
8:31  
take  
8:32  
and then what are the best resources  
8:34  
that have helped along the way what do  
8:36  
you what do you say  
8:37  
i guess i'm gonna go back to the same  
8:39  
thing the professional organizations  
8:42  
that i belong to and the contacts that i  
8:44

have and just a huge you know building a  
8:47  
huge network you can go on linkedin and  
8:50  
build a network there but i think to  
8:54  
actually belong to different  
8:55  
organizations  
8:57  
and have face-to-face contact i mean you  
8:59  
can just grow your network as big as you  
9:01  
want and you know figure out what you  
9:03  
want to do  
9:04  
what would your biggest challenge be as  
9:06  
a grounds manager at american  
9:09  
there's a lot of challenges i guess  
9:11  
i'm responsible for snow removal and  
9:15  
like you don't think about that when  
9:16  
you're going into  
9:17  
landscape field or whatever but that's  
9:20  
very common that landscape people do  
9:22  
that in the winter  
9:24  
you know when things are slower so  
9:26  
that's probably  
9:28  
part of my job that i i definitely find  
9:30

challenge i definitely don't like it but  
9:33  
you know that goes with the territory  
9:35  
but there's a lot of pressure and stress  
9:37  
that's no removal because you know you  
9:39  
have to  
9:40  
figure out if you're gonna get things  
9:41  
cleaned up so that the university can  
9:44  
open on time and they can't stand it  
9:46  
when they can't open on time or have to  
9:49  
cancel classes so there's just a lot of  
9:51  
pressure and stress around snow removal  
9:54  
looking back what is something you tell  
9:56  
yourself to help with your career like  
9:57  
if you could  
9:58  
talk to your like past self  
10:00  
i guess  
10:02  
maybe like trying to  
10:04  
start to build a network earlier than i  
10:07  
did  
10:08  
i really  
10:09  
didn't belong to professional  
10:11

organizations when i was in college or i  
10:14  
joined i had i belonged to a  
10:15  
horticultural club at university of  
10:17  
maryland but i really didn't know that  
10:20  
you could join the professional  
10:21  
organizations as a student and  
10:24  
i think that  
10:25  
i could have definitely gotten a jump  
10:27  
start on things and figured out which  
10:30  
direction i want to go if i would have  
10:31  
spent more time with people that were  
10:33  
already in the field i know you said  
10:36  
previously about how you wanted in your  
10:38  
career path that you the reason why you  
10:40  
picked horticulture was because you like  
10:42  
working outside instead of like being  
10:44  
indoors um what drew you specifically to  
10:46  
horticulture and like just in specifics  
10:49  
i just i love  
10:51  
nature and  
10:52  
being outside and i love plants i love  
10:55

animals i just really enjoy  
10:58  
getting my hands dirty and  
11:01  
doing physical work moving around and  
11:04  
then it's just so rewarding to  
11:07  
plant things and then see what they  
11:09  
develop into and if you stay at a  
11:11  
property for a long time like i've been  
11:13  
here at american university for 20 years  
11:16  
you can watch how  
11:18  
things that you planted when they were  
11:19  
just you know tiny little plants and now  
11:22  
there are fig trees and  
11:24  
um you just you see the fruits of your  
11:26  
labor i would say so it's rewarding in  
11:29  
that way  
11:31  
and then also how did sustainability  
11:33  
affect your career on a day-to-day basis  
11:35  
the whole sustainability movement i  
11:38  
would say kind of really developed as  
11:40  
i've been  
11:41  
at american university you know it's um  
11:45

it's changed  
11:46  
the way that we do things tremendously  
11:49  
so it's fueled us it's  
11:52  
given us lots of attention  
11:54  
lots of visibility lots of support from  
11:57  
the university because  
11:59  
landscaping and creating green spaces is  
12:01  
so sustainable and you know we've been  
12:04  
funded to do green roofs and rain  
12:07  
gardens and all sorts of things like  
12:09  
that and there's just been a lot of  
12:11  
attention on the landscape so the whole  
12:13  
sustainability movement has helped there  
12:15  
it's also changed the way we do things a  
12:17  
lot so  
12:18  
20 30 40 years ago it used to be  
12:21  
the expectation that you have a  
12:23  
weed-free lawn  
12:25  
so for instance now  
12:27  
with  
12:28  
cutting back on the use of pesticides  
12:30



and herbicides and which is what the  
12:33  
students and faculty have really  
12:35  
demanded and insisted upon and they  
12:38  
don't want us to be using chemicals so  
12:41  
if you go look at the turf that we have  
12:43  
now like it's got dandelions in it and  
12:45  
clover in it and things like that but  
12:48  
nobody complains about it like  
12:49  
everybody's just happy that it's green  
12:51  
and they don't care it's got you know  
12:53  
weeds in it where like 30 years ago that  
12:55  
would have been really frowned upon um  
12:59  
by like other people in the field or  
13:02  
just customers in general would not look  
13:05  
at a lawn and  
13:06  
think it's okay for there to be weeds in  
13:08  
it now  
13:09  
like people want to see that as proof  
13:11  
that we're not using um chemicals  
13:14  
and you know you've got the whole  
13:16  
pollinator thing with bees and natural  
13:19

pollinators being in danger from  
13:21  
pesticides that sort of thing so that's  
13:23  
another reason you know we don't want to  
13:25  
use a lot of them on campus and we  
13:27  
actually have honeybees on campus  
13:30  
to kind of demonstrate how important  
13:32  
they are for pollinating  
13:34  
our plants particularly you know our  
13:36  
edible plants and that sort of thing but  
13:38  
yeah the sustainability movement has  
13:41  
definitely put more attention on the  
13:43  
landscape and i think helped us overall  
13:46  
another change that was recently made  
13:49  
for sustainability reasons is a lot of  
13:51  
our equipment has changed like we used  
13:53  
to use gas-powered leaf blowers and just  
13:56  
this year january 1st of 2022  
13:59  
gas-powered leaf blowers have been  
14:01  
banned in dc and we have to use battery  
14:04  
operated ones  
14:05  
so  
14:06

there's a big learning curve and  
14:08  
adjustment  
14:09  
um with that they're only operate for a  
14:11  
short time and you have to change the  
14:13  
batteries out they're quieter which is  
14:16  
one of the main reasons that we got a  
14:18  
lot of pressure from neighbors  
14:20  
and  
14:21  
residents of dc to outlaw the gas  
14:23  
blowers because they're noisy but those  
14:26  
also cause more pollution from emissions  
14:28  
where you don't have that issue with the  
14:31  
battery-operated ones but they're  
14:33  
definitely not as powerful so it kind of  
14:35  
slows down our cleaning and that sort of  
14:37  
thing so  
14:38  
again expectations might change because  
14:41  
we are using such powerful equipment we  
14:44  
may not clean leaves out of wooded areas  
14:47  
anymore we might leave leave them in  
14:49  
beds if we have to or just mulch over  
14:52

top of them so we have to kind of  
14:53  
constantly adapt to the changes that are  
14:57  
coming our way thank you i've never  
14:59  
actually thought about like the  
15:00  
sustainability of how like  
15:02  
deeply affects agriculture i always feel  
15:04  
like it i never thought about how deeply  
15:07  
it could change a career or not train or  
15:10  
change  
15:11  
um over time like that can you walk me  
15:14  
through a normal day for you  
15:16  
as groundskeeper  
15:18  
there's really really no normal day  
15:21  
every every day is different which is  
15:23  
something that i like  
15:25  
but basically i the first thing i do is  
15:29  
check my phone as soon as i get up to  
15:31  
make sure there's no emergencies no  
15:33  
trees have fallen down on campus from  
15:35  
ice on them like we have today as i was  
15:38  
driving into work i noticed limbs on in  
15:40

the road and that sort of thing so when  
15:42  
you have icing on trees you get they  
15:45  
fall that some of them break and fall  
15:46  
down so i you know as soon as i looked  
15:49  
out the window and saw what kind of  
15:51  
weather we were having i touched my  
15:53  
phone just to make sure nobody had  
15:54  
called or reported any trees down on  
15:56  
campus  
15:57  
so like today that's the first thing i  
15:59  
did and then  
16:00  
when i got to campus i  
16:02  
just checked my emails make sure you  
16:04  
know we don't have emergencies going on  
16:06  
i check in with a couple of my ground  
16:09  
supervisors um a lot of them start at  
16:12  
six in the morning so i touch base with  
16:15  
them just see if what's going on what  
16:16  
they're doing today since it's kind of a  
16:19  
rainy nasty wet day outside they  
16:22  
probably can't do what they had planned  
16:24

on doing today so they might have to  
16:26  
switch up what they're doing and  
16:29  
do some like online training or  
16:33  
they can do some cleaning in our parking  
16:35  
garages things like that so on a rainy  
16:38  
day cold rainy day like this it's a  
16:41  
little difficult you know to have a  
16:43  
normal day we had planned on getting  
16:46  
some areas ready for campus  
16:47  
beautification day which is an event  
16:49  
that we have every year where we invite  
16:52  
students and faculty and staff to come  
16:54  
out and help us with landscape projects  
16:56  
so we're  
16:57  
kind of in the middle of  
16:59  
selecting sites on campus that need  
17:01  
landscape improvements and then we kind  
17:04  
of decide what we're going to plant  
17:06  
there and  
17:08  
we get all plants ordered and mulch  
17:11  
ordered and whatever else we need so  
17:14

that that we've got all those areas  
17:16  
prepared and ready to plant on campus  
17:18  
beautification day so we're doing a lot  
17:20  
of planning for that and preparation for  
17:23  
that event right now  
17:25  
so i mean it just really varies  
17:28  
by the season you know then what serious  
17:30  
camps beautification day is over then  
17:32  
our next focus will be getting  
17:34  
everything looking really good for  
17:36  
graduation so you know we try to switch  
17:38  
out our flowers at that point we have  
17:41  
bowls that come up that we leave in the  
17:42  
ground every year we used to take them  
17:44  
all out and replace them now we're using  
17:48  
primarily daffodils and narcissists  
17:50  
because the deer and the rabbits don't  
17:52  
eat them and they come back every year  
17:54  
really well so  
17:55  
we're trying to leave most of our bulbs  
17:57  
in the ground and then we just plant  
17:59

annual flowers and some of the key  
18:01  
places on campus like the entrances to  
18:04  
campus and a few places like on the quad  
18:08  
like in front of the school of  
18:09  
international service and the library  
18:12  
just very prominent spots so we don't  
18:13  
use a lot of annual plantings we use  
18:16  
primarily perennial plantings that come  
18:17  
back year after year this is kind of  
18:20  
what i'm doing right now is getting  
18:22  
ready for those different events  
18:24  
yeah that sounds exciting i tried my  
18:26  
hannah gardening and i  
18:29  
i'm good at planting like seeds and  
18:31  
growing them and then once they bloom  
18:33  
from there it doesn't go that well last  
18:35  
time i might try to plant cucumbers and  
18:38  
when i put them outside the iguanas ate  
18:40  
them when i was living in puerto rico  
18:44  
i'm sure the iguanas eat everything from  
18:46  
what i've heard  
18:48

i really do  
18:49  
yeah i know they're a huge problem like  
18:52  
in florida especially like in keys  
18:54  
uh the iguanas of just they are not  
18:57  
native there so they don't have any  
18:58  
predators and they've just i mean they  
19:01  
go out they have a program to try to  
19:03  
collect them and kill them because  
19:05  
they're just so many of them and they're  
19:07  
eating a lot of the vegetation that like  
19:09  
native  
19:10  
animals should have  
19:13  
thank you so much for coming this has  
19:14  
been super informative this would be the  
19:16  
end of the podcast again can't thank you  
19:19  
enough this is very helpful  
19:21  
[Music]  
19:39  
the garden gate was created by kyra  
19:41  
burba and carolyn mcdonald as part of  
19:43  
learning by leading initiative with the  
19:45  
smithsonian garden season two team  
19:48

includes mckenna friedland catherine  
19:50  
mariano and annie berlin music is  
19:52  
royalty-free music on soundcloud special  
19:55  
thanks to cynthia brown and paula healy  
19:57  
learn more by visiting [gardens.si.edu](http://gardens.si.edu)  
20:00  
thanks for listening  
20:02  
[Music]  
20:23