

Transcripts

Season 2 Episode 3

[Music]

0:10
welcome to the garden gate project a
0:11
podcast where we talk to professionals
0:13
across many fields who work directly and
0:15
indirectly with fans in our natural
0:17
world
0:18
we're students at american university in
0:20
washington dc and interns at the
0:22
smithsonian gardens
0:24
we created this project with the hopes
0:26
of inspiring a new generation to make
0:28
sustainable and meaningful change in our
0:31
world
0:31
i'm mckenna friedman i'm katriano and
0:34
i'm annie berlin
0:36
in this podcast we're talking to
0:38
virginia thaxton virginia thackston is a
0:41
horticulturalist for the smithsonian
0:44

[Music]

0:49

could we start with your
0:51
what's your name and what do you do in
0:54
your education background
0:56
hi my name is virginia saxton
0:59
i come from colombia south america i am
1:02
50 years old and currently i am a
1:04
horticulturist for the interior section
1:06
at the smithsonian gardens i have a
1:09
bachelor's in biology and a masters in
1:11
horticulture
1:13
that have served well with what i do
1:14
right now but there is a very long story
1:17
and a long path of how i got here how i
1:20
got to where i am right now and where
1:21
i'm working and that's something i
1:22
wanted to share with people because it's
1:25
part of your career it's the path that
1:27
you follow and how you go along and take
1:29
opportunities and how things change and
1:32
sometimes it's okay that they change so
1:34
i first did a bachelor's in biology in
1:36

my home country colombia after that i
1:40
got an opportunity to work for the
1:41
smithsonian tropical research institute
1:44
in panama as a research assistant and i
1:46
took it in a heartbeat like wow i'm
1:48
going to the jungle and so i went to
1:50
panama for a year and a half and i
1:52
worked as a researcher there and that
1:55
connected me then to the next step in my
1:58
life which at first i was planning for
2:00
grad school and then you never know what
2:02
happens i met the love of my life i got
2:04
married and i moved to the states so at
2:06
first when i got here i started working
2:09
at a garden center i've always known i
2:11
love working with plants so it had to be
2:13
with plants and before i figured out the
2:15
whole grad school thing i started
2:16
working at a garden center
2:18
and there i realized that horticulture
2:21
can be a career in colombia it's not
2:23

really a career that you study and go to
2:24
school for so i was a biologist and i
2:27
thought wow let me let me give this a
2:29
try i want to do horticulture um so i
2:31
got a master's in horticulture at that
2:33
time
2:34
and after that i still cannot have my
2:36
background in biology very on my skin at
2:39
the moment so i did work as a research
2:42
associate at the university at the
2:44
academic level after i graduated with my
2:46
master's and i did some research in the
2:48
biology department and after that we
2:50
moved to hawaii and i
2:52
found a contract job doing plant
2:54
physiology with the forest service and i
2:57
worked a little bit on that but then i
2:58
had a kid and i became a state at home
3:01
mom and i did that for 10 years actually
3:04
and it was important to me that my kid
3:06
could be bilingual that he that i would
3:08

see him grow up uh plus i was living in
3:10
hawaii and the opportunities weren't as
3:12
great to find jobs so i i just decided
3:15
hey let's just stay home be with my kid
3:18
this is good for the moment after that i
3:21
moved to puerto rico and then i started
3:23
my kid was older and i started working
3:25
at a plant nursery there part time then
3:28
full time
3:29
and got back into that love of plants
3:31
and doing things with plants so when i
3:34
moved back to the states i decided i'm
3:37
gonna try college again so i started a
3:40
second master's degree
3:42
um that didn't pan out but i at the same
3:45
time started working at a garden center
3:47
here in maryland then i worked at a
3:49
historic gardens in dc always looking
3:53
for i want to go back to having a more
3:56
stable
3:58
career again um and that's when i
4:00

remember my times with the smithsonian
4:02
in panama and started looking for jobs
4:04
to be a smithsonian and uh and got the
4:07
job that i have right now so that's
4:09
that's sort of the path as you can see
4:11
it's taken me many places many different
4:13
things always related to plants i very
4:16
early on knew what my passion was and it
4:18
was important to me to follow it because
4:20
i knew that if i was happy i was gonna
4:22
do a good job in what i was doing no
4:24
matter what it was so that's where i am
4:26
right now so my job as an interiors
4:29
horticulturist with smithsonian garden
4:31
involves taking care of all the tropical
4:33
plants that are inside the museums we
4:36
beautify museum spaces sometimes they
4:39
look beautiful but they also have safety
4:41
reasons for placing a plan in a
4:42
particular location
4:44
um we do contracts with each museum and
4:47

each director and each museum
4:49
administrative team comes to us and we
4:52
discuss plans they want they don't want
4:54
where they want them what style now some
4:56
of the styles depend on what plants are
4:58
gonna do well in a space so my team and
5:00
i do that for all the museums that the
5:02
smithsonian has around them all and it
5:04
also includes the coggard courtyard
5:06
which is at the national portrait
5:08
gallery an american art museum and i
5:11
take care of that space and i love it
5:13
it's this wonderful indoors conservatory
5:15
where we have tropical plants and it's a
5:17
wonderful space all year long um so the
5:20
job we do it's horticulture and we take
5:23
care of plants and we one of my team
5:25
members works at the greenhouses uh
5:27
where we house some of these plants when
5:29
they go back and forth between the
5:30
museums and museums don't offer the
best

5:33
conditions for plants so we have to
5:35
rotate them give them some tlc at the
5:38
greenhouse and bring them back to the
5:40
museums all that work we do it just it's
5:43
very rewarding and uh and i like working
5:46
indoors i like the fact that i don't
5:49
have to be outside i've done that in the
5:50
past and when i was younger too i didn't
5:53
mind being out at 99 degrees or 20
5:56
degrees now that i'm a little older i
5:58
like the fact that i can work indoors i
6:00
like the fact that i can work with
6:01
tropical plants because i'm from the
6:03
tropics so i feel at home every time i'm
6:06
watering especially the courtyard
6:07
because i water it with a hose it's a
6:09
big space with a lot of planters then i
6:11
feel like i'm watering my grandma's
6:13
backyard like when i was 10 years old
6:14
and i was dreaming of being a biologist
6:17
or working with plants so yeah that

6:19
that's the path and i think one key
6:22
aspect of following what you're
6:24
passionate about is that it gets you
6:26
where you want to be i've always felt
6:28
that but always willing to change your
6:30
path or to adapt to the circumstances if
6:33
i moved here let me find what i can do
6:36
and as long as i'm clear of what i want
6:37
to do then i ended up always finding
6:40
what to do the right thing to do uh
6:42
something that adhered to my schedule my
6:45
things that i liked though that that's
6:47
been a key to me in my career not being
6:50
scared of ever trying something
6:51
different and in this case for example
6:54
you like plants you study plants and you
6:56
feel like okay i'm going to be a
6:57
scientist and you end up well i'm going
6:59
to be in horticulture where it's a
7:00
science but it's an applied science
7:02
where i get to display things for people

7:05
i get to make people happy and that's
7:07
really nice um but then also now i found
7:11
a job that involves displaying things in
7:13
a museum involves an educator in the
7:16
aspect of the program we are educated
7:18
funds so we put together exhibitions and
7:21
we work in this other aspect that's not
7:23
necessarily the plan biology that i'm
7:25
used to but i'm enjoying that
7:27
researching things to show people to
7:28
educate people to tell them about my
7:31
passion for plan so sometimes you end up
7:33
finding a job that combines what you
7:35
like with something else that makes it
7:37
even better so i'm enjoying that aspect
7:39
of my job right now
7:42
yeah that's really cool
7:43
what area of puerto rico did you work at
7:45
i grew up there for like six years
7:48
oh how wonderful i used to live on the
7:50
west coast

7:51
in cabo rojo madiagues area oh that's a
7:54
cool place yes it was really nice um but
7:58
i drove around the whole island because
8:00
i love driving i love looking at
8:02
different habitats since i'm a plant
8:04
lover i like going to anything that that
8:07
shows me plants in their natural habitat
8:09
so different like the dry forest versus
8:12
the
8:13
national forest on the northeast which
8:15
is jungle
8:16
um things by the beach different types
8:19
of plants i
8:20
i enjoy very much understanding how
8:22
plants interact with their environment
8:24
one of my favorite classes in college
8:26
was plant physiology and i still love
8:28
plant physiology
8:30
it tells you about how the plant adapts
8:32
and as a matter of fact i used it a lot
8:34
when i was a researcher in panama or a

8:37
biologist but now that i'm a
8:39
horticulturist that same knowledge that
8:42
i've gained during other part of the
8:43
career it's helpful it's helpful to
8:45
understand why is the plan performing
8:47
well or not
8:49
like some of the skill sets that you
8:51
need as a horticulturist which is a
8:53
really cool career i i want to tell
8:55
everybody that um you you want to know
8:58
how to use the scientific method because
9:01
you a lot of times are trying to figure
9:03
out what's wrong with a plant that's not
9:05
performing where it is so we gotta
9:06
understand plant physiology and biology
9:09
and you gotta be able to know okay what
9:11
do i need to test do i take tissue
9:13
samples soil samples um different
9:15
variables to understand how they
9:17
interact so you end up it's almost like
9:19
a puzzle sometimes you end up figuring

9:20
out okay this plan maybe shouldn't be
9:22
here for these reasons and you just
9:24
throw out your work acquire this
9:26
knowledge and through experience and
9:28
practice too but you get to apply a lot
9:31
of basic science to what you're doing
9:33
sometimes it's not just about oh i get
9:35
to display a beautiful flower somewhere
9:37
for somebody to smile at and believe me
9:39
it makes you so proud when people
9:41
compliment you on what you're displaying
9:43
or they walk into the courtyard or the
9:45
museum and say wow a lot of people walk
9:48
up to me if they see me watering usually
9:51
we water the plants before the museum
9:52
opens but sometimes we run later we're
9:54
running around a lot of museums and i
9:56
see people tell me oh is that a real
9:59
plant they truly believe some of these
10:01
tropical plants are fake a lot of places
10:03
do have fake plans but we thankfully

10:05
have a nice horticulture team that can
10:07
take good care of plants so they look so
10:09
neat so perfect we do a really good job
10:12
with them that they look fake and
10:13
believe it or not that's a compliment to
10:15
us like wow they think they're fake that
10:17
means they're like in perfect condition
10:19
that's what we strive for
10:21
that's really cool so what is the best
10:23
thing you did to get where you are today
10:26
i think the best thing i've done for my
10:28
career in general overall is always be
10:31
willing to adapt to changes that are
10:34
happening in my life with the vision in
10:36
mind that i want to be doing something
10:38
with plans just that knowledge of my
10:40
passion for plans and being adaptable
10:42
has led me to always find what i want to
10:45
do where i am located so in my case it's
10:48
not like from the get-go i knew exactly
10:50
what position i wanted i just went with

10:53
my feeling of i want to be working with
10:55
plans where is that
10:57
being offered around where i am at the
10:59
moment and sometimes things in life
11:01
change your path i mean i i got married
11:03
i moved i had a kid things like that
11:06
that some people would think oh that's
11:08
deviating me for where i'm going what i
11:10
always did was oh let's i'm here now let
11:13
me see where i can find work with flat
11:14
so in part just be very clear of what
11:17
you like to do but always be looking for
11:20
it knowing that it can be presented to
11:23
you in different forms and wherever you
11:25
are
11:26
so don't be afraid of change or your
11:28
path changing but also train yourself i
11:30
mean obviously all the studying i did is
11:33
super um important you gotta you gotta
11:36
know what you like and train and study
11:39
those things i have a bs i have a

11:40
master's like i have all the tools i
11:42
need to be able to perform in whatever
11:45
job gets thrown at me or i find along my
11:47
path so i think that's a good thing know
11:50
what you want but also adapt to the
11:52
places where you are to see where you
11:54
can find it yeah
11:56
also and speaking of things like that
11:59
what are like the best resources that
12:00
helped along the way with your career
12:02
so best resources that have helped me
12:05
definitely your mentors along the way
12:07
when you like as an undergrad i had a
12:09
thesis director i uh advisor in colombia
12:13
is called director um a thesis advisor
12:16
as an undergrad he was the one that got
12:19
me the opportunity to work in panama for
12:21
example so when you have a good
12:22
relationship with your mentor with your
12:24
teachers the people that are helping you
12:26
they sometimes have information that

12:27
allow you to keep going then when i got
12:30
to baton rouge and was studying
12:32
horticulture my thesis advisor there was
12:36
the person that got me thinking about i
12:38
need to write it up i need to publish it
12:40
and and then
12:42
when you gain knowledge and experience
12:45
like that
12:46
you feel like you're building yourself
12:48
to do better and better things then when
12:51
i got to hawaii for example and i was
12:53
working as a plant contractor that was
12:56
through the the network that we have of
12:58
friends there and then somebody was
13:00
working at the forest service hey i need
13:02
somebody to do plant physiology
13:03
measurements so i think it's important
13:05
especially if you're young just to make
13:07
sure you connect with the people in your
13:10
life that are mentoring you like a good
13:12
connection and don't be ever afraid of

13:14
asking help or guidance that would be
13:15
important then along the way later on
13:18
sometimes like for example when i was
13:19
looking to do a second masters i just
13:22
started emailing professors i went
13:24
online i looked up for universities that
13:26
had the program that i wanted and i
13:28
started sending emails
13:30
hey
13:31
this is who i am i want to do a second
13:33
master's degree and then i ended up
13:35
getting an assistantship and she's been
13:37
wonderful even as a friend now so it's
13:40
the idea of connecting to people then
13:43
eventually when you get to the point
13:44
where you're looking for jobs for
13:46
example for the smithsonian gardens job
13:48
usajobs indeed.com those are useful um
13:51
you have your profile there you can you
13:53
can get emails that send you information
13:56
you need or what things are out there

13:58
based on the keywords that you put in so
14:00
those type of websites are important and
14:02
they have helped me later on early on it
14:04
was mostly just friends and mentors and
14:08
uh and just knowing where to look for
14:09
things and reaching out reaching out i
14:11
send emails sometimes like hey you don't
14:13
know me but this is what i would like to
14:16
do
14:16
this is how good i am at this or that i
14:19
can be of help in your program i can be
14:21
a grad student for you
14:23
and um and it always got me connections
14:26
and uh and results too so would you say
14:29
that there is a tight community within
14:31
your career especially at the
14:32
smithsonian i think hori cultures do
14:35
have a tight community to tell you the
14:37
truth i don't necessarily belong to many
14:40
like clubs or
14:42
societies but i know they exist i've

14:45
seen for example the american public
14:47
garden association there are places like
14:50
that that you can become a member of and
14:52
it connects you a lot or going to
14:55
conferences and visiting um places that
14:58
give talks and visiting sometimes
15:01
gardens botanical gardens and go listen
15:04
to talks and then you get to connect to
15:06
people that are doing the job you
15:07
potentially want and then you find out
15:10
about it one example is the philadelphia
15:12
flower show for example i participated
15:15
in a program about careers in
15:16
horticulture there so sometimes
15:18
conference and flower shows have the
15:21
resources to show people what the career
15:23
in horticulture is like give examples
15:26
they have people that are guests that
15:27
can tell what the career path has been
15:29
and can describe these things to you so
15:31
if you're into plants visiting flower

15:34
shows going to talks um
15:37
that or to botanical gardens that give
15:39
talks by by specially those are ways to
15:41
to find out what the career is like and
15:43
who is there now once you are a
15:45
horticulturist yes you can belong to
15:47
different associations or societies i
15:50
don't have that many i just moved to
15:52
maryland very recently then i found that
15:55
at my job we have a very big group of
15:57
horticulturists and those are not only
16:00
co-workers but friends that propel you
16:03
in your passions and and the things that
16:05
you want to still investigate and learn
16:07
you're constantly learning constantly so
16:09
that's a very neat thing
16:11
yeah that sounds like a nice community
16:14
to work with and then
16:16
looking back what is something you would
16:18
tell yourself to help with your career
16:19
like um if you could talk to your past

16:21
self
16:22
yeah that's always a neat question if i
16:24
could talk to my past self i will tell
16:26
myself always follow your heart and your
16:29
passion for what you want to do that
16:31
that's really the key because then no
16:33
matter where you are what life throws at
16:36
you
16:36
what you encounter what difficulties or
16:39
even good things that you encounter if
16:41
you follow that passion if you follow
16:43
your heart and you know you're doing
16:45
what's gonna make you happy then things
16:47
are easy all the time and you know
16:49
horticulture can be a tough job in the
16:51
sense that is intense you have a lot of
16:53
physical activity you're exposed to
16:56
extreme temperatures sometimes so it is
16:58
a tough job and day in and day out
17:01
sometimes you're like oh my gosh i'm so
17:02
exhausted but it's a good kind of

17:04
exhaustion it makes you happy because
17:07
you're doing what you want you are
17:09
learning about what you want to do um
17:11
you are improving other people's life
17:14
through what you do
17:15
um so different people have different
17:17
callings for ways to help others or to
17:20
feel happy themselves and um
17:22
and
17:23
that's something that i would tell
17:25
myself yes please don't ever lose that
17:27
uh keep that child inside you that says
17:29
i want to play with plans i want to
17:31
water things i want to you know put my
17:34
hands in soil and smell things and just
17:37
be connected to nature for anybody that
17:39
likes plants that's important and that
17:42
connection brings you to just performing
17:44
well whatever you choose to do yeah
17:47
that's really good advice actually what
17:48
would you say are some challenges that

17:51
you've come across
17:52
i haven't personally haven't found that
17:54
many challenges uh because in part
17:58
because i've been so adaptable like it
18:00
doesn't matter what gets interrupted
18:02
where i go i just continue trying to
18:05
work with plans time to work with fans
18:06
and i always find what i've wanted so
18:09
challenging wise well it requires a lot
18:11
of studying um which is the case for
18:14
most things in life but um
18:16
i remember having to take a lot of
18:19
chemistry classes and biology and
18:21
physiology and uh i know that can be
18:23
challenging sometimes
18:25
um
18:26
and did you just stick with it and um
18:29
and if you have that passion for
18:30
studying then it gets you through it
18:32
other challenge wise to i've always
18:35
thankfully been able to find that one

18:38
niche that one job where i can
18:40
do my thing and be happy and help others
18:43
and um
18:44
so i haven't found it very difficult
18:46
it's it's it tends to be also a career
18:49
where people are really nice i've found
18:52
that whatever i've worked the garden
18:54
centers the nurseries the historic
18:56
gardens even and here at smithsonian the
19:00
it is a nice environment it's always
19:02
welcoming horticulture is a happy people
19:05
um i i think that so because we're in
19:08
connection with nature where um for most
19:11
of us is really our passion
19:13
so you don't end up here by mistake um
19:16
you do want to work with plants and so
19:18
it's always been welcoming it's always
19:20
been
19:21
a fun a very fun job um so i haven't
19:25
found many challenges in that regard
19:27
okay yeah now not a lot of people have

19:30
that type of passion for careers and it
19:32
seems like it's like a community-wide
19:34
passion that doesn't happen all the time
19:36
especially for so many people
19:38
i think that is true and that's why
19:40
maybe careers in science or careers with
19:43
plans are going to draw to it people
19:45
that tend to you know have that passion
19:48
and be that way so we end up with
19:50
workplaces that are really nice to be in
19:53
what would you say like potential
19:55
students or like really anyone who
19:58
has started a interest in plants what
20:00
would your best advice be for them if
20:03
you have an interest in plans and i mean
20:05
depending on your age if you're still
20:07
high school or already college it's
20:09
important to first and foremost maybe
20:12
get experience volunteer at a garden get
20:15
some experience and hands-on experience
20:17
to make sure you know what aspect of

20:20
plants you want to work with do you want
20:22
to do landscaping and gardening do you
20:24
want to do you know plant biology or
20:26
molecular biology and uh so if you
20:29
decide like oh i don't really i'm not
20:31
the type that wants to be outdoors all
20:33
the time there's other there's many
20:34
multiple things you can do with plants
20:37
but maybe if you get a little bit of
20:38
experience um for example my son is in
20:41
high school he has volunteered removing
20:42
invasive species at a park and he goes
20:45
out on hikes so if you're that type of
20:47
person then you already kind of have an
20:48
advantage of knowing uh okay i think i
20:51
can do this um and the other thing is
20:54
also realizing or pinpointing what
20:57
classes you like in high school or even
21:00
early college career and are you more
21:02
drawn towards like physiology and
21:04
biology or do you like chemistry physics

21:06
and other types of sciences
21:08
that can also guide you as to what
21:11
aspect of plan world you want to work
21:13
with because there's there's multiple
21:15
things um so
21:17
just try to focus your your like for
21:20
plans in deciding okay what classes or
21:23
what experiences i've had and try to get
21:25
those experiences or
21:28
try to talk to people i can mention try
21:30
to if you go to a talk go talk to the
21:32
speaker go ask them you know what they
21:34
do
21:34
i'm i'm glad things like this podcast
21:36
are happening and there are ways out
21:39
there to find more information about a
21:41
career from people that are already in
21:43
it and that gives you a little bit of
21:46
information that is helpful when
21:47
deciding what exactly my major is going
21:50
to be in college

21:51
but again remember even if you choose a
21:54
particular major you you can end up
21:56
changing it um you know i went from
21:59
biology to horticulture went back to
22:01
biology a little bit then i ended up
22:03
just working with plants uh regardless
22:05
so
22:06
majors can shift a little bit um
22:09
and there's many that are
22:11
within that same plant world i would
22:14
call it so
22:15
so yes just uh try to get experience and
22:18
and obviously lots of studying um if it
22:21
is the classes that you want then that's
22:23
great yeah this has been super helpful
22:26
thank you so much for for doing this um
22:28
your
22:30
um your experience is like
22:32
really interesting um
22:34
we had uh we talked to someone um
22:39
uh i forgot

22:41
the the um
22:43
um his like the name of what he does but
22:46
he works for uh american university and
22:48
he manages the arboretum ground and it's
22:51
they're very different jobs but you both
22:53
have like a lot of passion for what you
22:55
do and it really shows with like the way
22:58
you talk about it and
23:00
um how
23:01
pleased you are with your with your work
23:02
and i i can't thank you enough for doing
23:04
this
23:06
you're welcome and thank you for giving
23:07
me the opportunity because yeah
somebody
23:10
that was young once and and was looking
23:12
for what to do with that passion that i
23:15
had it's important to have guidance and
23:17
to have things like this podcast and and
23:20
like i said the Philly uh flower show
23:22
also has like a group of people that
23:25

always try to
23:26
guide people in in careers in
23:28
horticulture so yeah and there's for
23:30
example i did a few months ago um a
23:33
webinar affair a career fair at the
23:36
american art museum that smithsonian put
23:38
together so there are places out there
23:40
to find out about career paths and um
23:43
and what to do so it's it's neat it's
23:45
neat to be able to talk about it and
23:46
hopefully a lot of people would get
23:48
interested in horticulture
23:50
thank you again
23:52
thank you mckenna
23:59
[Music]
24:03
the garden gate was created by kyra
24:05
berba and carolyn mcdonald as part of
24:07
learning by leading initiative with the
24:09
smithsonian gardens season two team
24:11
includes mckenna friedland catherine
24:14
mariano and annie berlin music is
24:16

royalty-free music on soundcloud special
24:19
thanks to cynthia brown and paula healy
24:21
learn more by visiting gardens.si.edu
24:24
thanks for listening
24:27
[Music]
24:45