Garden Gold
Turn Your Passion Into Your Profession

Text by Kathy Jentz
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As an avid gardener, it has probably crossed your mind more than a few times that you might like to turn your passion into your profession, but it is not always clear where to start or how to make that happen.

Second Careers
As an archaeologist Kathy Duncan used to take things out of the ground and now as a landscaper she put things in the ground. She still gets to play in the dirt in her job at Custom Gardens, a design/build company in Yorktown, VA.

Melissa Clark is a recovered lawyer who now practices landscape design with Landscape Projects, Inc., in Bethesda, MD. She has also now expanded her creative gardening outlet to photography and some freelance gardening writing.

Catherine Zimmerman owns a video documentary production company and finds herself in transition. She is now a certified Organic Land Care Professional and is designing landscapes as Gardens of the Three Graces, but is still producing videos and is even exploring teaching opportunities.

What these three women with wildly divergent backgrounds have in common is a love of gardening. They all made a career change to pursue their passion.

What motivated them to leave their steady jobs and secure paychecks? For most, it was a lifelong dream to be able to work with the soil.

Margaret Pavela of MAP Landscapes, LLC in Fredericksburg, VA, says she was, “looking for another career that would be more creative. Attending the Maymont Flower and Garden Show in Richmond, I visited the VSLS (Virginia Society of Landscape Design) booth which carried information about the GW program [see sidebar]. It was an ‘ah-ha’ moment. Landscape design seemed like a natural extension of my love for plants.”

Chris Coen, with Nature’s Palette in Glen Allen, VA, is a former US Air Force officer. He was motivated by, “Boredom, and a sense that I could still do the things I loved to spend time on back in high school and college. There’s no reason you have to be unhappy in your workaday life; refine your goals, and figure out how to meet them.”

Retirement Dreams
While many amateur gardeners fantasize of quitting their day jobs for horticultural-related pursuits, few of them actually take the plunge. Many wait until retirement to switch careers. Still others are not bitten with the gardening bug until later in life.

Taffy Turner is working on her Horticulture Certificate with the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) Graduate School while approaching retirement from the National Institutes of Health next year. She is leaving her future career path open, “I plan to volunteer at Brookside Gardens and the National Arboretum,” says Taffy, “I may do some consulting, but that’s not my main interest. I just want to work with plants and learn more about how they grow, their propagation, etc. If a part time job as a Horticulturalist came up, I would be interested.”

Wendy Bell is in a similar life-stage. She is getting ready to retire from the EPA and is in GW’s landscape design program. “I’m still not sure what I want to do,” Wendy explains. “I think that I will work for a landscape design company part time, but I’m still open to different ideas and would not regret being in the program even if I do not do it professionally.”

Education and Experience
If Wendy does ultimately decide on landscape design, she is off to a good start. Most all the practicing landscape designers we talked to have a degree from the GW program.

With career change, education is often the key. See our sidebar for a sample listing of area programs.

In addition, most successful landscapers were part of a professional organization for networking, continuing education, and career advancement. Whatever your field of endeavor, seriously consider joining at least one professional group to meet up regularly with your peers.

Don’t forget about experience as an educator. Trying out several jobs before settling on your ultimate career path can give you many beneficial skills and a well-rounded background. For Lisa Meddin, owner of Harmony Design in Williamsburg, VA, landscape design is her fifth career. “For many years I was a professional actress, which means that I acted occasionally and worked in offices to earn a living,” says Lisa. “That is where I learned about business, I also was the Executive Director for sev-
eral non-profit agencies, where I wore every hat, from program development to fund-raising, which was great training for the multi-tasking business ownership requires.”

Taking a job as an entry-level or internship position in an organization you are interested in exploring is one route to go. Another is to volunteer. There are innumerable docent programs in the greater DC area and many staff members started as volunteers.

Limitless Possibilities

Garden-related careers are by no means limited to those with degree tracks. Many horticulturists are self-taught. From farmers to botanical artists, there are plenty of formal classes you could take to advance your knowledge in these fields, but by no means are they a prerequisite to being a success at them.

Professions with garden-related aspects can be almost anything. A few examples: publicist at a public garden, cut flower grower, herbalist, retail salesperson at a garden center, arborist, etc.

Thinking outside the box may bring you ideas as to how you can combine your gardening love with your current career or how your specific set of skills can translate into a horticulture-related profession.

Kathy Jentz is editor/publisher of Washington Gardener magazine. She combined her journalism training, editing experience, and love of gardening into this publication you are now reading.

Horticultural Careers and Training

The following is a partial list of schools and organizations in the greater DC region that offer courses in horticulture, landscape design, and related fields.

Master Gardeners

- DC Master Gardeners — www.domastergardener.org or 202.274.7115.
- Maryland Master Gardener Program — http://mastergardener.umd.edu or 410.531.5556.
- Virginia Master Gardener Association — 540.286.0072 or www.vmga.net.

Professional Organizations

- Association of Professional Landscape Designers — www.apld.com or 717.238.9780.
- Landscape Contractors Association MD-DC-VA — www.lcamddeva.org or 301.948.0810.
- Pennsylvania Landscape and Nursery Association — www.plna.com or 800.898.3411.
- PLANET, the Professional Landcare Network — www.landcarenetwork.org or 800.395.2522.
- Professional Grounds Management Society — www.pgms.org or 800.609.7467.
- Virginia Nursery & Landscape Association — www.vnla.org or 800.476.0055.

Education Institutions

- Community College of Baltimore County Horticulture — http://ccbc.edu or 410.285.9754.
- Delaware Valley College Horticulture Department — www.devalco.edu or 215.345.1500.
- Montgomery College Landscape Technology Program — www.montgomerycollege.edu or 301.353.7803.
- Northern Virginia Community College Horticulture Technology Program or Landscape Design Specialization — www.nvcc.edu or 703.323.3000.
- Penn State University Department of Horticulture — www.psu.edu or 814.865.5471.
- University of Maryland Landscape Architecture Program — www.larch.umd.edu or 301.405.4359.
- University of Richmond’s Professional Landscape Design Program — http://oncampus.richmond.edu or 804.262.9887 ext. 359.

Other Sources

- JOBS In Horticulture is an indexed newspaper and daily web site devoted to employment for the Green Industry — www.hortjobs.com or 800.428.2474.
- Mid-Atlantic Nursery Trade Show (MANTS) — www.mants.com or 800.431.0066.