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# THE OCCUPATIONAL FOLKLORE OF HORTICULTURE IN THE GREATER ROCHESTER AREA

BY FRANCESCA SORBELLO

Since childhood, I have had a deep-rooted connection to plants and cultivation. I have spent my entire life around my uncle's garden center. Growing up, it was normal for me to go visit my dad at work, and also, see my entire family there. As a kid, it was also normal for me to hang out in my dad's office with the store cat, go for a walk around the greenhouse to look at the tiny African violets, and go out back to the store's small pond to find tadpoles and frogs. I didn't think anything of the customers or the great piles of mulch sitting out back. For me, it was just part of my family and part of my life. Studying folklore has allowed me to look at this part of my life in a whole new light. I have a different appreciation for everyone who has dedicated their lives to a complex and difficult industry, especially, as each and every person has learned about this industry in different, informal ways.

I conducted an occupational folklore capstone project to obtain my individualized bachelor's degree. My degree was focused on folklore, public history, and social justice. I interviewed five horticultural workers in the Greater Rochester, New York area to understand this all too familiar work through a new lens. I conducted five individual interviews at each interviewee's place of work, which allowed me to take photographs at each garden center and get a feel for what the work environment is like. My hope was to gain a better understanding of occupational folklore and how to conduct occupational folklore work.



Tom, co-owner and vice president of Bristol's Garden Center in Victor, New York, in his greenhouse with orchids, a jade plant, and other houseplants. Photo by the author.



A light purple pansy in a growing house in 2024. Photo by the author.



These white Bidens were ready for the spring 2024 season in the greenhouse at Van Putte Gardens in Rochester, New York. Photo by the author.

Additionally, I wanted to learn about each person’s individual connection to the field of horticulture and what motivated them to continue working in the field—and in all of my interviewees’ cases, to dedicate their lives to this work. I also wanted to get new perspectives on why horticultural work is important and gain a more multifaceted understanding of the culture within this industry.

I examined the informal work culture that I had unknowingly been experiencing my entire life. Through my research and interviews, I gained a clearer understanding of how prevalent informal learning is in the field of horticulture. I also gained a clearer understanding regarding my own informal learning over the years. Reading about planting and cultivating plant life is very different than knowing, off the top of one’s head, how much to spray each variety of fuchsia,

or being able to correctly graft an actual lemon tree, as demonstrated by one of my interviewees. This interviewee, a grower, spent over 10 minutes simply walking with me and telling me important information about each variety of plant we passed. A great deal of his knowledge was gained through his work experiences.

Although I spoke to people who all grew up surrounded by horticulture, they all spoke of the reality of learning by doing. For example, Tom was introduced to horticulture by his grandfather who gardened extensively. Another interviewee was born into a family of agricultural workers turned horticultural workers. And my uncle Len grew up around his uncle’s garden center, and he has owned his own garden center for over 50 years.

Many people in this industry spoke of the conservative and dynamic aspects of

horticulture. The dynamic pieces come into play in relation to unpredictable Rochester weather and the new trends that spread across the community each spring. Every season there seems to be a specific plant that many customers are searching for. For example, lemon grass was extremely popular a couple of years ago, and all of the garden centers were out of lemon grass. There are also consistencies related to the planting processes and the needs of different varieties of plants. Every year, growers have a schedule to follow to ensure that different plants are all ready for the spring. Some plants take longer to mature and flower than others, which means that they need to be planted earlier in the season.

Through this project I gained a new appreciation for the passion put into horticultural work. The culture is often instilled in people early in their lives. All the people I interviewed, including my uncle, were exposed to horticulture, or a related field, from a very young age. When you are surrounded by something your entire life, and it is also a source of joy, it is both familiar and enjoyable. I interviewed someone in their 70s, who has worked at their family’s garden center for their entire life. This person emphasized, “When you love what you do, it’s not work.” The business is familiar to them and an important piece of the family history, in



Houseplants and annuals in one of Wayside Garden Center’s growing houses in February 2024. Photo by the author.



The main greenhouse of Wayside Garden Center showcases annuals and houseplants. Photo by the author.

addition to being a source of joy. This feeling of familiarity and home is what supports the industry.

The family-owned, family-run garden centers in the Rochester area are fueled by personal connection and genuine love for plants. I asked one interviewee, who is a grower, about what keeps him motivated to do such a difficult job, and he began by saying, it's "the passion for flowers." The horticultural workers I interviewed all spoke of family members who inspired their own love of plants, and they keep those family members close, as they continue working in the field today. For example, one local business has a portrait of the late founders of the garden center—the parents and grandparents of those running the business today—displayed prominently in the store. Another explained that his mother instilled a love of plants within him. He told me that his favorite plant to grow was his mother's favorite plant—yellow begonias.

Every year, thousands of people pass through the greenhouse doors of these

businesses to purchase plants. Customers and employees, alike, purchase vegetable plants, fruit trees, and herbs from these establishments. The consistent passion that they put into horticultural work, year after year, extends to the customers who are directly

impacted by the work that they put into growing and caring for these plants.

The comfort of food and the cultural significance of foodways starts with horticulture. Each of the interviewees shared how their own heritage connects to horticulture.



Small pots of string of hearts are growing in the greenhouse at Gallea's Greenhouse and Florist in Pittsford, New York, in February 2024. Photo by the author.



Close up photograph of a yellow daylily in April 2024. Photo by the author.

One of the interviewees comes from Dutch heritage, where flowers—especially tulips—are deeply ingrained in the culture. Another interviewee from Mexican background shared the importance of growing food and the significance of fresh fruits and vegetables when cooking Mexican food. My uncle also shared how our Italian heritage is related to horticulture for a couple of reasons, including that our family members worked as farmers when they initially immigrated to the Rochester area—which is related to



Len from Wayside. Photo courtesy of the author.



A horticultural worker shows off the lemon tree he grafted himself over a decade ago. Photo by the author.

horticulture, and also, how specific foods, such as herbs and vegetables, are used in Italian cooking.

For many horticultural workers, plants allow them to feel at home and to enjoy their work. For others, the ability to plant, cultivate, harvest, and enjoy the fruits of their own labor creates a sense of home. Together, foodways and horticulture create an unparalleled sense of home and belonging. This is all because of the passion that horticultural workers put into their work. ▼



Francesca Sorbello is a folklorist from Rochester, New York, who has most recently explored how her love for plants and horticulture intersects with folklore. Photo courtesy of the author.

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