

5 MINUTES WITH

STEPHANIE E. WHITEHOUSE

By Teresa McPherson

Stephanie E. Whitehouse is retail general manager at Dickman Farms Garden Center in Auburn, New York.

Could you share a little about your background?

I went to undergrad for plant science and grad school for weed ecology, both at Cornell University. I was then recruited by Peace Tree Farm, where for eight years I worked as the sales and marketing director and helped create the branding and launch for lavender 'Phenomenal'. During that time, I was recognized in GPN's first 40 Under 40 class and served on AmericanHort's GenNext committee.

In 2017, I returned to my hometown of Skaneateles, New York, and childhood garden center of Dickman Farms. I've been the retail general manager ever since.

What surprised you about working as retail general manager at Dickman Farms, after working at a grower for several years?

I still pinch myself sometimes — I enjoy the world of garden retail as much as I loved working on the grower side of the industry. Dickman Farms is unique in that, while retail and wholesale operate separately, we're still very closely tied together. There isn't a day that goes by where our teams don't interact and work together.

However, retail is a much different game than growing. There are more moving parts, more variables that affect the flow of a given workday, it's not linear, and there are consumers! It's like showing up to Family Game Night expecting to play Monopoly, but you end up playing Risk using the pieces from Cranium. The retail game is constantly changing and the puzzle is a tough one to crack, but I absolutely love it.

What do you love about your job?

My perfect day at the store is when the team is killing it — customers are nearly giddy with plants in hand, full carts loaded with a sea of flower color are flying out the door, and everyone on staff is thriving at what they do best. I call those Printing Money Days. It's what makes the madness of spring so addicting.



What drew you to this industry?

While my love for the environment and stewardship of the earth came from my early childhood visits to my grandmother's farm in Vermont, I have always said my origin story sprouted when I took the "Living with the Land" ride at EPCOT at age 10. I distinctly remember turning to my mother and saying emphatically, "This is what I want to do for the rest of my life."

While I took some detours in college and graduate school (I once wanted to work for Monsanto), it was my summer internships with Bill Miller, Ph.D., at the Cornell Horticulture Trial Gardens, the Seeley Conference, and my first trip to Cultivate (then OFA's Short Course) that jumpstarted my career and solidified my passion for horticulture.

I am truly a plant nerd at heart. Every plant has a story that is fascinating in one way or another, whether it be how it was bred, its unique attributes, or perhaps that it's been around for millennia. Those stories — the benefits plants provide our planet, and the connection they can make with and between people — are what really excite me and why I want people to live a life with plants.

What is your biggest goal for the next year?

We had a profitable 2019 after a few bumpy years, so our team is eager, excited and ready to repeat our successes for 2020. As a member of the Garden Center Group, we have used several of their resources to help us become better retailers. Our goal is to have another profitable year in 2020, through streamlined merchandising, increased sales of our core Dickman Farms products, and making sure our team is positioned and has the resources to use their strengths. We played a good game in 2019; now we want to do it again and even better. 🌱