

Joe Rand
YOST 5954
Professor Ross
How do I learn best?

I believe that before one is motivated to learn something new, there must be inspiration. I also know that I learn best through stories. The following story illustrates how I have come to learn so much about my passion for horticulture. It speaks to the different ways I have learned through people and experiences, and what inspired me to learn. So, here goes. Enjoy!

I can remember being inspired at a very young age through my visits to the greenhouses here at the University with my grandpa, who was an agronomist here for 20 years. I loved wandering around the greenhouses, looking at all the different kinds of plants and watching people work. Every spring, right around my birthday, grandpa would stop over to our house with a car full of bedding plants he'd grown in the greenhouse over the cold winter. We'd unload them, and then go to work planting everything at my house, and then at he and grandmas. Grandpa was very methodical about how things were planted and grown, straight lines and rows...always. I'm certain this discipline was developed during his youth growing up on the farm, planting row after row of corn. I remember thinking how constrained this made me feel, but I was young, so I just mimicked grandpas methods, planting in rows, carefully placing labels and tags, and fertilizing and weeding on a regular basis.

As I grew older, feeling more and more constrained by grandpa's methodology, I started to experiment more by planting things in different ways making groups and patterns instead of rows. I even started to throw the tags in the garbage because I realized I could remember what everything was, and didn't like

how un-natural the gardens looked. Rather than rows of petunias or snapdragons, I would plant in a triangle or star or circle, and make fun patterns of flowers.

As my passion grew, it inevitably became more and more costly. Just having grandpas flowers wasn't enough any longer. I grew tired of being limited to the standard bedding plants, and wanted to experiment with anything and everything I could get my hands on. This motivated me to get my first job at the age of 11 at a local greenhouse. I reveled in the work. Planting seeds, watering, weeding, selling...I loved it all. I must have loved it, because every weekend from the ages 11 to 16 my mom would wake me up at 4am to drop me off at the greenhouse where I would hop in the box truck full of plants we had loaded the night before to head down to the Minneapolis Farmers Market. We'd unload the truck of plants, and pull out the 2x8 board shelves to create our benches for plants to sit on in our stall. I can vividly remember the process of first removing the buckets and setting them out in a particular pattern, then unloading the hanging baskets, then larger pots, then flat after flat of bedding plants. Then it was time to sweep up the area and get it looking ship shape for customers, who would start arriving at 5am! Early on I can remember Barb, the owner's wife, taking the broom away from me and teaching me how to sweep because I was doing it wrong, and just shooting bits of stuff all over, rather than into a pile. I remember being offended that she didn't like the way I was sweeping. After she showed me "her" way though, I realized it was better and more efficient. Then it was time to sell. The more we sold, the less we had to pack back up in the truck. My real motivation, however, was the satisfaction of making a big sale, and teaching people about the different kinds of plants, how to care for them, and giving them my design ideas.

I developed a friendship with an older gentleman, Ed Shimek, who reminded me of my grandpa. Ed had the stalls next to us. Ed grew perennials as well as annuals, and every once in a while, when he'd see me

eyeing something up in his stall, he'd call me over and give me one. He'd say, "You better take this one home, it doesn't look too great, and probably won't sell. Maybe you can nurse it back to health." I never once received a plant from Ed that I thought looked in any way unhealthy, but I didn't care. Thus began my obsession with perennials.

Perennials come up every year, so I didn't have to spend so much of my hard earned money each spring on plants. They just came up on their own. I can remember a couple of times not even getting a paycheck for the previous week's work because I had taken home so much plant material that I had spent my check before I got it! My passion must have been infectious to Nils (the owner) and Barb, because we started growing perennials and selling them too; further fueling my obsession, while further depleting my earnings each week. Pretty soon most of my parent's small suburban yard had been transformed into gardens; around the entire house and perimeter of the yard, with islands in the middle. The mowing time had been cut in half from when I was younger.

My neighbor growing up was like a second mother to me. Vicki was also an avid gardener, and there was always an unspoken sort of competition between the two of us. It was always very friendly though. We would share tips about different plants, and when it came time to separate things, we'd always share with each other. I can remember from an early age being obsessed with these beautiful leafy plants called Hostas. Vicki's were huge, and each one was a little different. I'd wander over to her house every few days to watch them progress in the early spring from tiny little pointy crowns just poking through the surface of the dirt, to several inch tall tubular leaves with green and white striations, to a vase shaped leafy crown, before they would finally grow large enough that the leaves would droop down to the ground forming a beautiful mound of green and white. This is where the real obsession began!

Eventually, Vicki would share her hostas with me, but in the meantime, I was on the prowl every weekend at the farmers market for interesting hostas. Every few weeks I'd come home with another one and my mom would ask, "Where are you going to plant that one? You're running out of room!" When I'd run out of room, I'd take out the hose and lay out the outline of a new garden in the yard. Mom never cared; it was Dad who I had to convince. More often than not it wasn't very hard, as long as I agreed to do all the work, pay for it, and maintain it.

In the summer before 9th grade, when I was about 15, I decided that I wanted to dig a pond in the backyard and landscape around it. After some careful research, and procuring a free used pool liner and sump pump from a family friend, dad gave the go ahead to the project. I spent almost a week digging the kidney shaped, 3 foot deep pond. It had a step about half the way down all around where I could place plants. The dirt that came out of the hole was piled in the back of the pond to create a waterfall to circulate and aerate the water to help prevent algae growth and provide oxygen for the plants and fish. My other grandpa, dad's dad, worked for an asphalt company, and had easy access to boulders and rocks to use to landscape and naturalize the pond. So for several months, every Sunday afternoon we'd go to a rock pit with grandpa in his pickup, and load up the back with as many boulders as it could hold without bottoming out. I always wanted huge rocks that none of us could lift by hand, so grandpa would just go get the bobcat and load them with the large machine. How we would get the boulders out of the truck once we got home, never occurred to any of us, and every week the same thing would happen; we'd get home and have to back up the truck to wherever we wanted the boulder to go, and push it out the back of the truck...wherever it landed is where it stayed. We only had one casualty when we brought home a boulder the size of a wheelbarrow. When it rolled out the end of the truck, it didn't

just plop onto the ground, but rolled into the side of the house and made a huge dent in the siding. We were lucky it didn't roll further and break something, or one of us.

That reminds me of another lesson I learned while constructing the waterfall. Like most teenage boys, I thought I was invincible. Until one day while I was constructing the pond, I dropped a large, flat and sharp-edged rock onto my foot. It wouldn't have been nearly as bad as it was, if I was wearing shoes that is. I had to call my mom to come home from work to take me to the emergency room. Luckily nothing was broken, just severely bruised and cut up. As my luck would have it, this was the week before I started high school. So my first 2 weeks of 9th grade I was hobbling around on crutches and had to tell everyone how dumb I'd been. I didn't mind telling them though that I had built a pond over the summer. To this day, each spring I go to my parent house and vacuum out all the debris and rotting leaves on the bottom of the pond, power-wash all the rocks and liner, and get it ready for a new season. My mom has become an integral part of the process...moral support really since all the rotting leaves and gunk that built up over the previous year, and then froze to rot all winter, have the most putrid smell of swamp and decomposition it knocks me over and makes me gag sometimes.

I have collected over 180 varieties of hosta to this point in my life. Many years ago I made a plan to one day be able to fuel my addiction by separating and selling plants right from my yard. Last spring I finally did so. I spent several weeks digging up all manner of plant, carefully separating them, and then planting them in pots I'd saved from years prior. I ended up with more than 1,000 pots, which pretty much took over the whole driveway, and had a two day plant sale. I figured I'd make a couple hundred dollars, but was astounded that in the first day sold almost everything, and made \$800! I didn't have enough left for the next day to be able to even call it a plant sale, so that night I went back out in the

backyard scavenging for unsuspecting victims I could pop out of the ground and quickly dismember to be sold off the next day. I made over \$1,500 in those two days! I plan to do it again this spring.

I shared in class last week that my dream is to someday be a hosta farmer...no really. To be able to spend my days cultivating my passion and make a living from it would be amazing. Without all the experiences I've had along the way and everything I've learned from so many people, it wouldn't be an attainable dream. So many of the things I learned can't be gained from reading a book, they had to be learned through experience, from people, from doing, from failing, and from succeeding. I wouldn't have been able to learn them without the passion I gained at a young age, inspired by those trips to the greenhouse with my grandpa. Little did he know what those seemingly innocent trips to work with him would grow into, and what they would inspire.