For Amy Jeffries, a love of horticulture started in her grandmother’s garden. This love led her to Oklahoma State University, and now Jeffries lives out her dream at Monticello, the home of Thomas Jefferson, Jeffries said. “My dad always told me to find something I love to do and then figure out a way to get paid for it,” said Amy Jeffries, OSU horticulture alumna and superintendent of gardening at Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello. “Gardening with my grandmother was the base foundation behind the career path I chose.”

Jeffries said the idea of pursuing a degree in horticulture and landscape architecture was more than just a hobby in high school. It blossomed into a new and exciting passion, she said.

“My second semester of college is when I realized I liked the idea of sharing gardening and plants with other people,” Jeffries said. “So, I switched my concentration to public horticulture.”

Jeffries said Doug Needham, former OSU horticulture professor, influenced her throughout the time she spent at OSU. His class helped her decide she could pursue a career in horticulture, she said.

“Amy was a very sharp student,” said Doug Needham, now head of the education department at Longwood Gardens in Pennsylvania. “She has a great passion for horticulture and public gardens.”

Needham said Jeffries is a great role model for students interested in pursuing a career in horticulture.

While at OSU, she was an active member of the President’s Leadership Council and a member of the OSU Symphony Orchestra.

She also designed and maintained gardens at private homes and estates at the Oklahoma City Zoological Park and Botanic Garden.

Needham encouraged her to pursue an internship at Longwood Gardens to gain some real-world experience and understanding, Jeffries said.

Needham said he felt Jeffries was highly qualified for an internship at Longwood Gardens based on her experience. “She sought experience and likely that is what set her above the other candidates,” Needham said.

Needham was a Longwood Gardens advocate during his tenure at OSU and during the time Jeffries interned with Longwood Gardens.

As an advocate, he informed students about the great opportunities Longwood Gardens had to offer.

“Horticulture is such a unique field of study and practice, as it touches both the art and science of plants,” Needham said.

Needham said he continues to encourage students to look at the diversity of occupations under horticulture and pursue the one that speaks to their passion and career goals.

“Interning at Longwood Gardens was the stepping stone for a solid foundation that in turn helped me get where I am today,” Jeffries said.

While serving as an intern at Longwood Gardens, Jeffries worked in the outdoor displays.

She was responsible for the maintenance of the display beds, including planting, watering, deadheading, weeding, and changing bed displays as well as some supervision of volunteers, Needham said.

“What I didn’t realize is that when you get to the East Coast, Longwood Gardens is a name that people recognize,” Jeffries said. “When you say ‘I studied horticulture at Oklahoma State’ and ‘I did an internship at Longwood Gardens;’ it will open doors.

“I completed a really stellar internship at an entry-level position in horticulture and just continued to expand my knowledge,” she said.

Monticello hired Jeffries in 2009 and promoted her to superintendent of gardening in July 2013. She manages the gardeners in the fruit, flower, vegetable and visitor center gardens.

“Any didn’t waste any time when I met her, and that is what I liked about her,” said Gabriele Rausse, director of gardens and grounds for the Thomas Jefferson Foundation at Monticello.

Today, Jeffries manages the new Monticello Visitor Center that is home to many different plants native to Virginia landscapes. She is a part of the team responsible for the Revolutionary Garden Tours and the Sequential Vegetable Planting, Rausse said.

The Revolutionary Garden Tours, led by a Monticello professional staff member, take visitors on a journey through Thomas Jefferson’s vegetable and fruit gardens followed by a Meet the Gardener segment. Guests participate in seasonal gardening activities, including planting, harvesting, and sampling crops ranging from asparagus to baby root vegetables.

Additionally, Monticello highlights the Sequential Vegetable Planting, a three-part series that educates people who are planting gardens at their homes. Visitors participate in a hands-on workshop, learning useful gardening tips to help their gardens reach full potential even late in the season.

“The fact that Amy was willing to get straight to the point and work hard was something a person who was applying for a job at Monticello needed,” Rausse said.
“We needed a person who had a degree in horticulture that was willing to adventure herself into the unknown.”

When Monticello hired Jeffries, one of her primary responsibilities was to

manage the new native plant garden at the Visitor Center.

Although she had no experience caring for native plants, she was the perfect candidate for this position because she was unafraid of challenges, Rausse said.

“She is the ‘curator’ of every problem that arises,” Rausse said. “She has been indispensable to me.

“Coming to work and knowing that she is here is the warranty that everything will be done,” he said.

Students interested in pursuing a career in horticulture need to know the field is really hard but rewarding, Jeffries said.

“If you are interested in making an impact on the changing global environment—whether through research or production of foods, ornamentals, or turfgrass; through landscape design, installation and maintenance; or through public horticulture—then you should investigate the many opportunities under horticulture,” Needham said.

He said the need for well-trained and educated students is increasing.

Horticulture can be exciting, if taught in a way to appeal to the senses, Jeffries said.

Mountaintops were demolished in 1768 to make room for Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello that stands to this day. Photo by Leonard Phillips.

“Jefferson leaves us a great legacy,” Jeffries said. “I didn’t realize I would be growing plants Jefferson grew or had access to when he was alive.”

Jeffries said working at Monticello is a humbling experience and each day brings on a new exciting challenge.

Great people work at Monticello and being able to work at the home of Thomas Jefferson is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, she said.

“I love my job,” Jeffries said. “I am grateful for the opportunity I have been given at Monticello.”

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Hines
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