

# Creating Passion Outside the Industry

**Running is one of my passions.** I haven't always been a runner though. In fact, I didn't start running until I was in graduate school. What prompted me to start? A friend was rehabbing a knee injury sustained while cross-country skiing and wanted to run a 5k in the spring to celebrate successful completion of physical therapy. She asked me to train and run with her.

I had never run a 5k before in my life, yet somehow found myself agreeing to it. I thought I'd run the one 5k and call it good, but four years later I find myself running marathons. Along those lines, how often do we invite friends to come with us to a garden center? Could they be harboring an undiscovered love of plants and gardening? They may only buy one or a few pots of flowers initially, similar to me thinking I would "just run one 5k," yet over time may develop a strong passion for gardening.



*Jennifer Boldt is research horticulturist for the United States Department of Agriculture, Agricultural Research Service, and a member of GPN's 40 Under 40 Class of 2016. She can be reached at [jennifer.boldt@ars.usda.gov](mailto:jennifer.boldt@ars.usda.gov).*

## A CONVERSATION STARTER

This past winter and spring I helped coach a marathon-in-training group. One of our key weekly meetups was the Saturday morning long run. We had a lot of time to chat and get to know each other as the weeks passed and our runs got longer. Besides discussing running and training-related topics, conversations often included how everyone's week had been, family updates and weekend plans. One morning I mentioned that I needed to stop by the greenhouse on my way home. Someone asked what I was planning to purchase, and I explained that it was my research greenhouse. I needed to check and see if any of the plants needed to be watered.

Naturally, this segued into questions of where I worked and what my job was. My first thought was, do I give a quick 30-second synopsis, a five-minute overview or an hour in-depth reply? I mean, they were captive running mates for the next 3+ hours! It reminded me that I need to be able to effectively converse with many different people about my research. My running buddies are a diverse group, varying in age, professions and backgrounds, yet we all are connected through a common love of running. Plants can also be a common bond for people in our communities. Are people aware of how much plants impact their daily lives? As someone who has grown up in the industry, it's easy for me to forget that not everyone has had similar exposure. We need to share our experiences and knowledge to help foster interest in horticulture as a career or hobby.

As a research scientist, I naturally find it easier to explain my research and its applicability to researchers and growers than to someone in my running group. But, it's important that folks know what we are researching, why it's important to growers, and ultimately, why it's important to them. For example, we are currently studying how plants utilize silicon and the benefits it can provide during production, especially when plants are stressed (heat stress, chilling, heavy metal toxicity, nutrient deficiency, etc.).

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While it may not immediately be something they can connect with, the applicability hits a little closer to home when I mention its use can help growers reduce fertilizer use, pesticide use and/or energy costs. Likewise, we have been measuring and modeling plant photosynthetic responses to light intensity, CO<sub>2</sub> concentration and temperature. The take-home message is that we are developing software tools to help growers strive towards optimizing plant growth while minimizing energy use, which is a win-win for both growers and consumers.

## WHAT IS THE BIG PICTURE?

One question I am encouraged to answer when sharing my research results is "So what?" In a nutshell, it reminds me to not get so wrapped up in the details that I forget to communicate the impact and outcomes of the research. What is the big picture? How is it useful to the grower, and what are the scientific, economic and/or environmental benefits? It allows people to make a connection with my research and understand its importance. So, I'll toss the question of "So what?" to you to mull over. In your daily activities, take a moment and see if you are answering that question for your customers and stakeholders. It may generate some useful selling points for that new plant introduction. It may provide vision for that new multifunctional landscape design. It may help retain existing customers, as well as introduce more people to our wonderful world of horticulture. [gpn](http://gpn.org)