

Trading Gray Cubicles for Rainbow Skies: How I Changed Careers and Ended up Growing Plants in Hawaii

Emily Teng

University of Hawaii, Dept of Tropical Plants and Soil Sciences, 3190 Maile Way, Honolulu, HI 96822

eteng@hawaii.edu

Keywords: Careers, poinsettia, tropical plants

INTRODUCTION

Most of you reading this pay a power bill, right? Here is a question: have any of you ever wondered how your account information with the power company gets transferred over when the power company changes over to a new software system? Anybody? Neither did I. At least not until my job was to get that information moved over by writing COBOL

computer code. If this sounds boring, then I have to agree. But twenty years ago, I was freshly graduated from college with a bachelor's degree in Chemistry from the University of South Carolina Honors College, and I was sitting in front of a computer screen for eight to twelve hours a day typing code like this.

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PROGRAM ID - CUSTOMER ACCOUNT

1  MOVE CUSTOMER NAME      TO  ACCOUNT NAME
2  MOVE CUSTOMER ADDRESS   TO  ACCOUNT ADDRESS
3  MOVE CUSTOMER ACCOUNT   TO  ACCOUNT NUMBER
4  MOVE CURRENT BILL       TO  ACCOUNT BALANCE
5  MOVE PAST BALANCE       TO  PAST BALANCE
6  MOVE AMOUNT PAID        TO  ACCOUNT PAID
7
8  ADD PAST BALANCE         TO  ACCOUNT BALANCE GIVING  CUSTOMER BILL
9  SUBTRACT ACCOUNT PAID   FROM  CUSTOMER BILL GIVING  TOTAL DUE
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Figure 1. Writing computer code.

During my undergraduate years, I thought I was going to become a veterinarian. I love animals! I worked at a veterinarian's office part-time. I studied for the VCAT, the veterinary school entrance exam. I visited veterinary schools. But sometime during my senior year, I realized I was too faint-hearted. Or maybe I was too soft-hearted? I don't know the right term, but I couldn't stand to see sick animals who were suffering. I get attached to animals much too easily and it flat out made me too sad to see sick animals. Even though I knew I would be helping them, I decided becoming a veterinarian was not the right path for me.

There I was, a college graduate with a degree in Chemistry, unsure of what I was going to do with my life. I interviewed for a few jobs and ended up working for Accenture, one of the largest consulting firms in the world.

I ended up in the Utilities sector, working on projects at power and water companies. I converted these companies to new software systems. I tested new software and wrote computer programming code to customize the software. I would fly out from my base in Charlotte, North Carolina every Monday morning to my project sites in Florida, Delaware, Missouri and other places. I generally stayed on a project for a few weeks or for many months. I'd fly home every weekend and spend a few days living my real life before flying out early Monday morning again.

Now don't get me wrong, the job was not bad. I met great friends along the way. I was paid well. It was a great firm to work for. But for me, this was just a holding period while I figured out what I really wanted to do with my life. I was living in corporate apartments during the week. I had two of everything; one for the week and one for the weekend at home. On some projects we sat in cubicles. On other projects we would all sit in a room at conference tables hammering away at our laptops, usually for at least ten hours a day.

By 2001, I had been at this for about two years. I was on a project at a water company in Cherry Hill, New Jersey. My roommate decided to germinate an avocado seed in the corporate apartment we shared. I thought to myself, "Well, that is fun." She named him Oscar.



Figure 2. Growing avocado on a window sill.

We grew more avocados. Then we started growing other plants in our apartment. Pretty soon, we had quite the collection.



Figure 3. Houseplants -One of those avocado trees is Oscar.... My friend will be very upset that I don't know which one he is!

At home, I started some more growing projects. I renovated the backyard of my parents' house and built a gazebo and garden. I

took a vacation to Hawaii (using all those airline miles I had racked up flying every week). Of course, I had to start trying to grow tropi-

cal plants inside my apartment in South Carolina. I grew all sorts of potted plants outside. I even had a Chia Turtle!

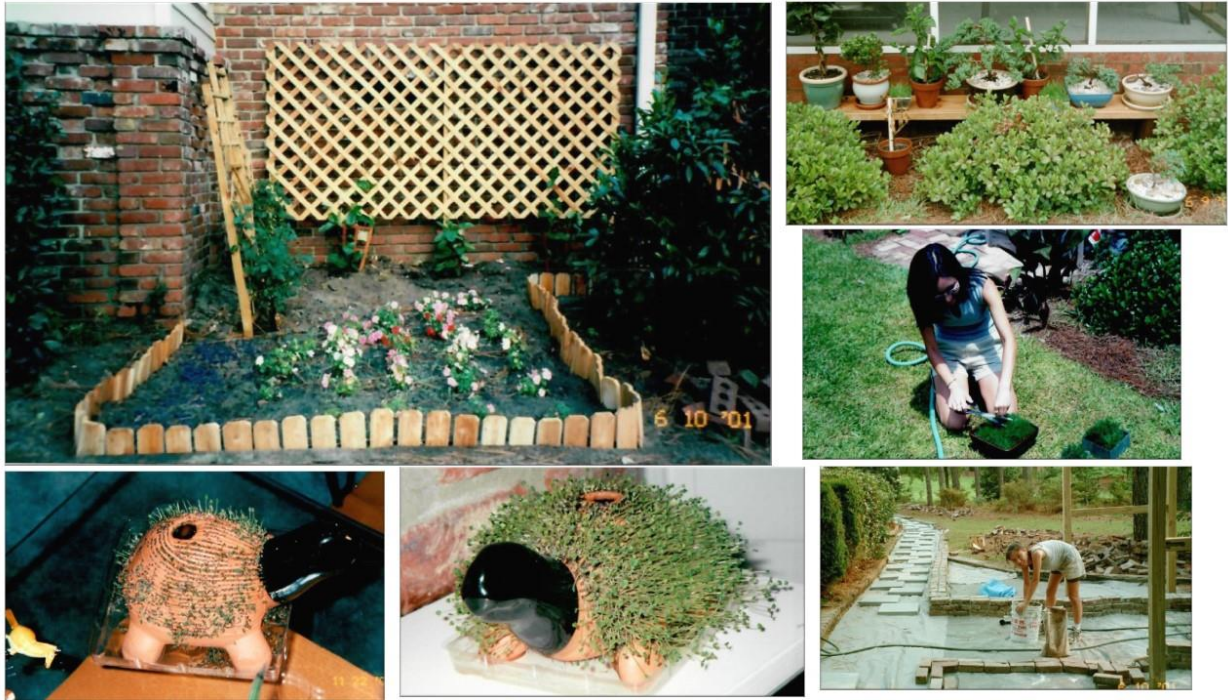


Figure 4. Backyard tropical plants.

I don't remember the exact thought process I went through. But at some point, it dawned on me that I could make a career out of this new hobby of mine. It was a true light bulb moment!

So I committed. There was a bit of a recession with the e-commerce bubble popping, and Accenture offered employees a voluntary Flex Leave program where I could basically do whatever I wanted and still get paid 20% of my salary. I took full advantage of this opportunity and enrolled in a couple plant sciences courses at the University and got a job at a landscaping company.

I planted and maintained bedding gardens for shopping centers, office complexes and suburban neighborhood entrances. It was the most physically demanding job I had ever had but I learned to till soil, drove a dump truck, and built up enough strength to haul

around fifty-pound bags of mulch. Most importantly, I learned how to grow things like beautiful beds full of pansies, petunias, marigolds, and snapdragons that created masses of color! I loved it.

Since I had no education in this field, I decided I would get a master's degree in horticulture. I applied for master's programs and took this chance to move to Hawaii. So off I went on a road trip across the USA to Hawaii 5000 miles away - but not without some hiccups along the way...

And I did it. I studied and received my master's degree in Tropical Plant and Soil Sciences at the University of Hawaii.

Instead of having no idea what to do this time around when I finished my degree, I was faced with several possible directions. I could go work for one of the major seed companies like Pioneer or Monsanto. They paid well but working there made no sense to me. I didn't

quit my high paying corporate job at Accenture, move to Hawaii, and get a master's degree in horticulture to work on crops like corn and soybeans at a major corporation. I pursued horticulture because I loved growing beautiful flowers. I wanted to work in ornamental horticulture. So, I looked in the newspaper (yes, the newspaper - newspaper listings were still useful even in 2007!) for part-time jobs to earn some money while looking for a full-time position. I found an opening for an hourly nursery worker at a local family-owned nursery growing potted ornamentals and various other plants. At the interview,

the owner told me their propagation manager had just quit and I would probably be a good fit for that job.

The owner and I hit it off and she quickly became one of my best friends. I learned to grow a wide variety of plants. I learned how to run a small wholesale nursery. I had gone from sitting at a computer all day in a gray cubicle to being outdoors in beautiful Hawaii growing all kinds of flowering plants. And there was a bonus as we have many animal friends at the nursery!



Figure 5. Seasonal plants at the wholesale nursery.

The owner worried that I would get bored because I had a master's degree and was overqualified for the job and wanted me to promise I would stay at least a year. Well, she didn't need to worry. I've been there for 12 years now.

One of the themes of the IPPS conference this year was to "CHANGE DIRECTION NOW." Although I didn't consciously think too much of it back then, I did just that. I'm

not a bold person. In fact, I was always the quietest, most reserved student in school growing up. I was even voted "Most Likely NOT to Be Heard" in high school. But I suppose you gain confidence as you get older. Or maybe it isn't so much confidence, but that you start worrying less about what others think. In any case, I somehow succeeded in doing that thing people say so much so that it has become cliché: I followed my passion. I

am sometimes jaded by these touchy-feely inspirational themes, but looking back, I must admit that my life has sometimes embraced these themes quite well.

That is how I “Traded Gray Cubicles for Rainbow Skies.” It truly changed the trajectory of my life. I can’t imagine where I would be or what my life would be like if I hadn’t made those decisions to change direction. It would have been pretty easy to stay in that cushy consulting job. I could have climbed the corporate ladder and become a very highly paid manager. I certainly would have

been better off financially by now. But I don’t regret the decisions that got me to where I am in my career today. I wouldn’t have twelve years of growing experience under my belt. I wouldn’t have decided to go back to school (AGAIN!) to pursue a Ph.D. I wouldn’t be the poinsettia growing expert in our department at the University. And I certainly wouldn’t have gone to Australia to tell everyone about my career and taken a once in a lifetime chance to tour New Zealand with IPPS members.



Figure 6. Traded Gray Cubicles for Rainbow Skies.