

Featured Articles

Doctor of plant medicine

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Ed Albanesi Editor

Driving home from West Palm Beach after my interview with Stephanie Bledsoe, doctor of plant medicine, I couldn't get the lyrics and tune from the movie, "Ghostbusters," out of my mind:

If there's something strange
in your neighborhood
Who ya gonna call?
Ghostbusters

If there's something weird
and it don't look good
Who ya gonna call?
Ghostbusters

No, no, no – there's nothing scary or supernatural about what Bledsoe does. The song started grating in my mind simply because of something that Bledsoe told me.

"When people get sick, they call their doctor. When people's pets get sick, they call their veterinarian," she explained. "When people's plants, gardens or lawns are dying, many of them aren't sure who to call."

Thanks to a new program of study at the University of Florida, the options for people with sick plants, gardens and lawns are increasing. Who they gonna call? Plant doctors.

And, with all due respect to the many otherwise capable plant consultants out there, this new breed of plant doctors is about as high as you're going to get on the plant consultant food chain.

Bledsoe, who grew up in DeLeon Springs where her parents were in the fern business, earned a bachelor's degree in microbiology from the University of Florida in 1999. She told us that she was trying to figure out a way to apply her microbiology skills to plant health when Dr. Bill Zettler, a UF professor, told her about a new course of study that was about to be implemented on the Gainesville campus.

According to the UF Web site, the mission of its Plant Medicine Program is to provide all segments of agriculture with rapid, accurate and scientifically sound diagnoses and management strategies for all types of plant health problems through the activities of broadly trained plant doctors.

The multidisciplinary Plant Medicine Program consists of courses and practical training in all relevant departments, including agronomy, entomology/nematology, horticultural sciences, plant pathology and soil and water science. The goal is to train students in the science, practice and business of the profession of plant medicine and to prepare them for interesting and rewarding careers.



Dr. Stephanie Bledsoe, with her children, Jasper, 4, and Aislylin, 1.



Bledsoe began studies in the Doctor of Plant Medicine (DPM) program in the fall of 2000. She and the other students enrolled constituted the first group that would receive training in this new program. After a rigorous regimen of 90 hours of course work and 30 hours of internships, Bledsoe received her DPM degree in December 2004. Today she is one of about 30 graduates of the program.

Bledsoe has two children, Jasper, 4, and Aisylin, 1. She runs a consultant business out of her residence in West Palm Beach. Her husband, Derek, is the golf course superintendent for The Breakers Resort. She gets referrals from landscaping contractors she has worked with and by word of mouth. Recently she began doing a weekly column for the Palm Beach Post where readers are invited to email her questions.

When she is hired to diagnose a problem she takes a scientific approach and tries to not jump to conclusions. "Sometimes the problem is obvious," she said. "Damage caused by insects such as mealy bugs or spider mites is usually pretty easy to spot. Other problems, yellowing leaves for example, might have been caused by a number of different things."

Bledsoe recalled an instance where unexplained damage to leaves on plants in close proximity to a swimming pool ultimately was found to be caused by chlorine splashing on the leaves. "This profession, like any of the medical professions, requires excellent observational skills," she said.

Another challenge that Bledsoe faces is convincing her customers that some of their long-held beliefs run counter to science. "In general, people water too much and think that if a little fertilizer and pesticide is good, then even more would be better," she said. "Sometimes landscape companies will misdiagnose a problem and the fix they propose makes things worse."

More often than not, however, Bledsoe will work with landscapers and spraying companies to come up with solutions to residential and commercial gardening challenges. "I much prefer to work in concert with other landscape professionals," she suggested. "There are things that each of us know that can contribute to solutions."

One of Bledsoe's college internships was with the Palm Beach County Extension Office. She said that Extension agents can be a valuable source of information for homeowners seeking advice on plant and garden issues. However she said that their workload is usually spread pretty thin throughout an entire county.

"When someone calls me for assistance, I'm there - usually the same day," she explained. "When my analysis is completed, I will provide them with a detailed report of the problem and the recommended plan of action."

Bledsoe's fees are probably less than most would guess. She charges \$100 per hour for on-site work and says that she can usually get to the root of the problem in one hour or less. "Sometimes people will ask me to follow up by doing a complete analysis of the plants and soil on their property," she said. "That might take two hours and require some lab work that will cost \$55 per sample. Whenever I send samples off to a lab, I include my analysis and recommendations in the fee."

We asked Bledsoe if all doctors of plant medicine are engaged in the same type of business that she is. Although some are doing similar things, not all are.

"I know graduates of the program who are working for crop consulting companies and tree nurseries," she revealed. "Another is an Extension agent, two work for the U.S. Department of Agriculture and another chose to become a high school ag teacher."

When we asked Bledsoe what it was that she hoped this article would accomplish she replied, "I want your readers to know that there is a plant health practitioner that will come to be known as the ultimate source for information about plant health.

"When people see 'DPM' after our name, most aren't sure what it means. One time I met someone who thought I was a podiatrist.

We're the 'go to' persons to seek out when you have a plant problem.
I want the public to know we're out there."

***(Editor's Note: You can contact Dr. Bledsoe at (561) 324-8688
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