

Stephanie Bledsoe D.P.M.



The Palm Beach Plant Doctor



Some years ago, I was home visiting my family, relaxing after the exhausting final semester of my baccalaureate studies in microbiology. After a couple days of decompression I began to take in the beautiful surroundings I had always taken for granted created by my grandmother who reveres her gardening like a religion. Walking through her fifty or so acres of gardens can be truly inspiring and uplifting. As I meandered along pathways through gardenias and azaleas with palettes of blooms nestled in between and the sweet smell of the confederate jasmine, I started looking toward the future. It suddenly occurred to me that there might be a way to apply microbiology skills to plant health, which would allow me to enjoy the outdoors in my career as I was at that moment. This revelation led to a sequence of phone calls, the last of which was to Dr. Frank “Bill” Zettler at University of Florida who described a doctoral program in its final stages of approval that would give me the expertise to fulfill my vision. I met with

him the next day and was introduced to Dr. George Agrios, who has authored esteemed textbooks in plant pathology and was instrumental in establishing the new Doctor of Plant Medicine (D.P.M.) degree at the university. I enthusiastically began studies in D.P.M. program with the first group of its students in the fall of 2000.

Having inherited an entrepreneurial gene somewhere along the line, throughout my graduate studies, I knew that ultimately I wanted a consulting business. I met other consultants at professional meetings, conventions and trade shows, and was particularly inspired by Madeline Mellinger of Glades Crop Care whom I met at the annual meeting of the National Alliance of Independent Crop Consultants (NAICC). I spent the summer of 2002 as a Golf Course Intern in Palm Beach at The Breakers Resort. I was taken by the beauty of tropical planting material and saw a vast potential for consulting in the Palm Beach area both for golf courses and landscapes.

I returned to Gainesville for my last year of courses that August with a renewed sense of direction. Incidentally, that October the Assistant Golf Course Superintendent (Derek) with whom I had worked during the summer asked for my hand in marriage, I accepted, and he moved to Gainesville shortly thereafter. Just when I was finishing up my coursework, The Breakers offered Derek his old position back which had not been filled since he left. We returned to Palm Beach to embark on our new family (we now have two children) and professional lives.

After completing another internship at The Breakers and one with Palm Beach County Cooperative Extension in Commercial Horticulture, I received my D.P.M. degree in December of 2004. I officially started my consulting business, Palm Beach Plant Medicine, in March 2006. I was very fortunate to make the acquaintance of a landscape contractor whose family business has been catering to the elite of Palm Beach for three generations creating and maintaining estate landscapes. Seeking to bring cutting edge quality to his business, he has retained the services of Palm Beach Plant Medicine to develop sound pest management and fertilizer programs for all properties, and provide consultation and recommendations on any plant problems that occur. Diagnostics are performed mostly in-house, however sometimes disease samples are sent to other labs. Evaluating seventy-five accounts is enough to keep one person busy full time, but I still make time for consulting with other clients here and there. Palm Beach Plant Medicine provides consultation on soil analyses, weed management, IPM, and pesticide resistance management in addition to the aforementioned services.

Currently Palm Beach Plant Medicine is a one-woman operation. I had envisioned gradually building up enough business to keep me busy full time, but instead hit the "mother load" where the situation was to jump in with both feet and sink or swim. It has been exciting, challenging, scary, humbling, and very rewarding all at once. Owning your own business gives you freedom and

flexibility that you might not ordinarily have and also pushes you to always give your very bestafter all, it is your name on the line and you only get one chance to make a good first impression with clients. There are pressures and decisions that one would not have to deal with working for another company, but for me personally, the freedom of owning the business far outweighs any of these challenges.

I have a large vision for the future of Palm Beach Plant Medicine. I would like the company to be a venue for plant medicine students to fulfill internships or even to employ plant doctors in the future as the business expands. Right now I am just taking it one day at a time and trying my best to make a good name for plant doctors in the public eye. Dr. Bledsoe can be contacted at:

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