

Kiss My Aster

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A Personal History of Houseplants

Amanda Thomsen



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There was a time in which I sounded just like the customers who come in every day and tell me that they can grow things outdoors just fine, but houseplants completely elude them. I bought myself an ivy, croton and asparagus fern at Frank's Nursery & Crafts with my babysitting money in 7th grade. They raced to the death (and all "won"). I didn't have much luck as a young adult with houseplants.

Then I was offered a job I really wanted that had me working outdoors when the time was right and in the off season indoors taking care of plants that hadn't had a ton of attention during the growing season. Like a switch being thrown in my head, I decided I was going to be good at houseplants.

It started just like my passion for perennials, taking half dead things off the pitch pile and seeing what I could resurrect. I was the last stop before death for so many palms that I have to laugh. I did instantly get good at houseplants. It was just a mindset. So good, in fact, that I left that job to go work for a really big plant rental company.

In my interview, the desperation coming from the interviewers was palpable. They asked me a "hypothetical" question. "If the AON Center had a raging case of fungus gnats, could you take care of it? How?" And I got excited because that's an easy one. I outlined to them what I would do. Their eyes lit up, they stood and did some kind of chest bump that seemed more fitting for a sports event. I was hired.

My territory was downtown Chicago. I was in charge of the plant care teams, routing the drivers with deliveries and visiting customers/sites. I worked my ever loving buns off, but it wasn't a question of science, training and care. There was so much dysfunction and flat out unwillingness that I didn't make it a year.

Me: "You can't water the pothos that much. They don't need that much water and you're giving all 83 floors in this building a nasty case of gnats."

Them: "Too bad, I'm going to do it anyways. I've worked at this toxic job for 12 years and I can tell you don't have the heart to fire me, blondie, so zip it and let me get back to drowning these plants."

One account had a 21-ft. poinsettia tree stand that the plant technicians dumped water in on a Friday afternoon (huge, high-traffic lobby) only to come in Monday to find it so thoroughly infested by Botrytis that it looked more appropriately like a Halloween display.

The warehouse was full of huge, amazing plants that had insufficient light and were somehow never available if I needed one for an account replacement. It was truly a quagmire of a job, but I got to walk 2 miles a day around my gorgeous city and I got really, really good at using the L and the fantastic and sometimes creepy pedway that reaches from the lake to city hall without having to go outside.

Also, no one mentioned in that ill-fated interview that Christmas decor was mandatory and all management was on the hook to make all these massive displays out of old dusty inventory from yesteryear and we wouldn't be allowed to go home until things were complete. I blinded them with science (horticulture) and they pulled the wool over my eyes.

When I quit, the regional manager came in to ask me to stay. I gave the whole situation serious side-eye. If I was important enough for that grand demonstration I was probably worth listening to back when I was like, "No, I can't drive a box truck up and down Michigan Avenue by myself. I have strep throat, a 204 degree fever AND it's no where near my job."

I have to chuckle now. I "escaped" back to exterior, but took what I learned with me—cachepots forever, how to not get fungus gnats. And that if someone can grow things outdoors where they have no control whatsoever in what happens to their plants, they sure as shooting can have plants indoors where they're 100% in control of every aspect. **GP**

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