

Kiss My Aster

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When You Wish Upon a Bus Tour

Amanda Thomsen



I was fortunate to be asked to speak at the Florida Flower Trials in Orlando in mid-May, and while I should have said “no” as my visit would wind up being smack dab in the middle of ground zero for planting and getting things in the ground here in Illinois, I couldn’t pass up a chance to visit Disney World to share what I know onstage at a flower and landscaping conference.

Now, I manage to get a Disney mention into most of my columns (because I am obsessed), but it wasn’t always that way. I was a total Hater for 20 years and now that I’m swept up in the Magic, I tend to sprinkle my enthusiasm around like Tinkerbell does Pixie Dust.

Here’s the deal: as a highly creative person, the attention to detail and design of a space that not only accommodates the masses, but aims to delight all five senses, just tickles me. The largest part of all of that, for me, is the landscaping. Careful landscaping is an art that’s often last on most business’ list. At Walt Disney World parks and resorts, it’s as important as anything else and I can feel the difference.

Upon drop-off at our resort, the landscaping was all on-theme, perfectly maintained and way more ambitious than anywhere else I go, other than actual public gardens. At the Magic Kingdom, the annuals are planned in perfectly designed beds and hanging baskets, and change in theme seamlessly from Adventureland to Tomorrowland.

We were once at Magic Kingdom in mid-February and noticed that the floral Mickey head at the entrance had been changed from Mardi Gras colors to spring colors, overnight. There was no sign of a new planting or any disturbance, and the park had closed at midnight the night before and opened at 8:00 a.m. These are the kinds of details that thrill me, as I can’t get a crew to perform more minor miracles during normal business hours with the sun out.

I’ve visited the Epcot Flower and Garden Festival many times now. As a northerner, I can appreciate the blood, sweat and tears that goes into making all that happen. Most visitors freak for the topiaries of characters, but I’m in love with the bedding combos and containers. The plant usage is extraordinary—mixing unusual, underused plants into bedding combos that will form the backdrop of thousands of family photos. After all, the flower that blooms in adversity is the most rare and beautiful of them all.

After a few days enjoying the Parks, I did my presentation and was able to watch a trio of speakers from Disney Horticulture speak. They spoke of trialing plants, high performers, the challenges of landscaping for the masses and all about producing 5,000 hanging baskets a year. For the first time in forever, I felt like chucking in the towel, moving

to Orlando and going to work with these horticulturists who spoke to me in my language.

The second day of the conference was a bus tour and the most important stop to me was Backstage at Disney Horticulture. I was downright fan-girling and, of course, it was amazing. Hanging basket production was beyond impressive (the secret is the spinning hangers so all sides are perfect) and there were backup topiaries and containers everywhere. But what tickled me most was the All-America Selections trial garden right there in the middle of it. It seemed like an extravagance at first, but, of course, trialing plants before you commit to making Mickey's ears out of them is just good business.

As excited as I was, I decided I wouldn't be running away to join Disney Horticulture; it was time for me to just keep swimming back home to start up my northern garden for the season. Where miracles take a lot more time. **GP**

Amanda Thomsen is a funky, punky garden writer and author. Her blog is planted at KissMyAster.com and you can follow her on Facebook, Twitter AND Instagram @KissMyAster.