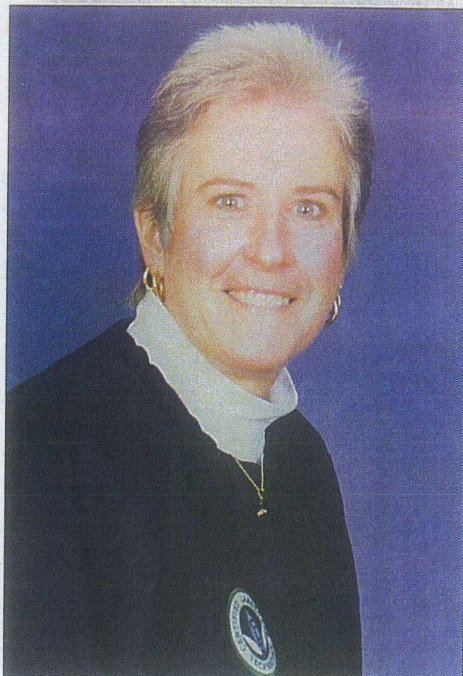


Experience was the best teacher for Manager of the Year Monica Blair, who supervises with style.

By Ali Cybulski

BLAIR'S Flair

Manager of the Year Monica Blair wears many hats – she hires, trains, researches new products and even services plants when needed. Photo: Hewlett's Photography



First impressions can be misleading. Consider Monica Blair. Meet her once and she may come across as a shy or quiet. But this same woman is a commanding manager who gets the job done. Her personality – calm, cool and collected – makes her approachable as a manager and patient as a trainer.

Blair, the director of horticultural services for Buckingham Greenery, Buckingham, Va., is a problem-solver, whether dealing with people or plants. What distinguishes Blair is that she has climbed her way from bottom to top, doing virtually every job imaginable – and still filling in when there is a need. She understands the challenges of each job, whether dealing with a technician or a supervisor.

She's been there, done that. Along with a handful of role models, experience has been her greatest teacher. But she doesn't downplay the significance of those in supportive roles who help her focus on the task at hand – motivating and educating employees to do their best.

Delegating, communicating and guiding are Blair's focus, rather than overseeing the day-to-day details. At the same time, she continues to build management and horticultural knowledge, adding to the vast stores she has built over the years through plain old-fashioned hard work.

Blair's dedication to professional growth, customer service and industry involvement led to her selection as the 2003 *Interior Business Manager of the Year*.

HANDS-ON LEARNING.

Blair thanks her mother and grandmother, both green thumbs and garden club enthusiasts, for

passing down their passion for plants to her. Even as a high school student, Blair knew she wanted to work with plants, and she studied horticulture through a vocational program.

She started her career as a grower, which is how she connected with her mentor, Connie Balint, the president of Buckingham Greenery. Balint had purchased plants from Blair and wanted to interview her for a position in her company. "And here I am, 17 years later," Blair says.

She started at Buckingham Greenery in 1986 as a horticultural technician, and Blair admits there was an adjustment period. "I was used to things growing from cuttings or seed, and now I was going into an office environment," Blair says. "I knew what to do in a greenhouse – you had all the light requirements you needed, and nowadays, people want living plants in closets, almost. It was an adjustment for me because I was giving the plants too much water."

Blair also had to adjust from an environment where she was working more with plants than with people. "Of course, now I had to deal with clients, and that was a change," Blair says. "I think it was difficult also because I was used to going to one place to work. And with this job, there was no office at the time because the company was young. I went to the job site, and I could have been downtown one day and across town the next day. This was a whole new adventure."

But she quickly caught on, and her grower background was a good foundation for her development as a technician. She also says her parents and Balint inspired her to work hard and ascend the corporate ladder. "But I also try to inspire myself," Blair says. "I think my work is a reflection of myself."

MANAGERIAL GROWTH. The Golden Rule guides Blair in everything she does. But she says it especially applies in her role as a manager. Her management career began in 1989 as account manager for the Richmond, Va., branch of Buckingham Greenery. And she steadily rose in the management ranks until she was promoted to her current role as director of horticultural services in 2002.

"As far as managing people, I think I always wanted to treat the clients and team members the way I wanted to be treated," Blair says. "I wanted to be fair and honest."

Balint, who nominated Blair for the Manager of the Year Award, adds that Blair's management style is professional and ethical. "Her attitude is customer service-driven, and many past and present team members tell me how they praise Monica's direct yet personal management style," she says, adding that clients also take notice of Blair's talent. "Many clients let me know about Monica's knowledge, fol-

