

Nurturing naturalist brings blooms to Beaufort

Rose spreads the gardening word as Clemson Extension horticulture agent

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Beaufort County's newest Clemson Extension horticulture agent for consumer education, Laura Lee Rose is in full bloom. Although she graduated at age 50 from Clemson University with her bachelor's degree in ornamental horticulture, Rose has been sowing the seeds for this job her entire life.

Since being hired Sept. 1, Rose said she "cannot quit smiling about this job. I feel like every job I've ever had has led up to this one. It feels like my education, my life experiences, who I am and where I come from prepared me for it."

Growing up in the Columbia area, Rose believed her grandparents were magicians because they could root azaleas and camellias and make them grow. "I've learned from them to love the natural beauty of native plants," she said.

Rose's nurturing is rooted deep into South Carolina and Beaufort -- from studying nursing to learning to be a commercial crabber to leading the E.C. Montessori School aftercare program in Beaufort for five years to having her own landscaping businesses.

A three-year nursing student at the University of South Carolina, Rose worked with stroke victims and autistic children. Later, as a commercial crabber, she learned about the waters and how to work 25 crab traps in McLellanville. She has also worked on a vegetable farm, raised chickens and has spent many summers working with children at a camp in North Carolina.

For the past 29 years she's lived on St. Helena Island, where she has developed a collection of plants that she describes as a "hodgepodge quilt" as well as a network of friends and colleagues. "If I don't know the answer to a question, there's a great chance I can find out," Rose said.

Bob Guinn, senior extension agent for Clemson's Beaufort office, believes that Rose's built in knowledge of the Lowcountry is a big plus.

"We are delighted to have found someone who has lots of experience with plants here in the Lowcountry," said Guinn. "Laura Lee has worked in this area for a number of years and she's able to right away identify plants and to assist customers here in the office."

Music is another talent Rose has mostly taught herself. Inspired by her mother, Rose began playing folk music on the guitar in high school and now plays "blues banjo" with three area groups, The Sunday School, Fripp & Friends and the Lazy River Band. "It's just fun, jammin' with a lot of original songs," said Rose, who's written a few herself.

During the summers of the 1980s, in between teaching at Montessorri school, Rose and her son, Sam, ran a landscaping businesses, "My Mamma Drives a Lawn Mower," which later became "Rosebud Gardening."

Horticultural therapy is her stress reliever. "When you focus on something like gardening, it's good therapy," Rose said. "I've worked many a problem out by pushing a lawn mower or in the moment of planting." Clients requested commercial landscaping plans, so she took classes at Technical College of the Lowcountry, where she got her associate degree.

"I've always worked with animals, vegetables and children -- all the best things you could possibly have," Rose said.

Looking for a change of focus, Rose took her Golden Retriever, Honey, and headed to Clemson in 1995 to get her degree.

After graduating in 1997, she returned to Beaufort, where she has worked at the Garden Gate Nursery for six years, as a substitute teacher for the Beaufort County School District and now at Clemson.

Due to budget cuts, Rose's job is funded through four sources including the Town of Hilton Head Island, where she can be found regularly on Wednesday mornings and other days. She also works with Beaufort-Jasper Water and Sewer Authority, the Beaufort County Stormwater Utility and the Beaufort County School District. Beaufort County provides the office space and, in return, Rose offers environmental education.

On a recent Friday, Rose and 4-H agent Beverley Connelly held a demonstration for Lady's Island Elementary School students during their Splash Week celebration. They showed how water runoff and what people do affect the environment.

Students oohed and aaahed as they watched Kool-Aid colored water and the items humans add to the environment run through the streets of a model seaside town and into the ocean and the groundwater below.

Last week, Rose and Master Gardener Marge Murray gave tours of Barb Farrior's garden, the first in a series of educational seminars to be offered by the Lowcountry group.

"It's (the seminar series) for people to get information for not having to commit to the 40-hour Master Gardener class and the 40 volunteer hours," Rose said. Other topics will include pond and water gardening, plant propagation, lawn care and proper pruning techniques.

"We're all pitching on same team," Rose said. "Water is hugely important to the quality of life here."

Among the items on her agenda is to promote voluntary recycling in Beaufort County. Since she started her job in September, one of the most popular questions she is asked is about lawn management and the differences "as opposed to other places, north and west," she said.

Rose has found one of the secrets of life and how to keep it blooming. "I feel grateful it is a position that every day is an opportunity to learn," Rose said. "One of my life's goals is to

continue my education. The secret of life is finding something you love to do and you get paid for it."

Rose added with a big smile, "I'll still be paying student loans when I collect Social Security."



Photo by Bob Sofaly/Beaufort Gazette
Laura Lee Rose, left, the new horticulture agent for consumer education at the Beaufort County Clemson Extension office, shows students at Lady's Island Elementary School how her enviroscape works during the school's Splash Day. Rose started with Clemson on Sept. 1.
