

## COS Ornamental Horticulture Program Changed Re-Entry Student's Life

After raising a family and a part-time career, Melissa Christensen enrolled in an ornamental horticulture class at College of the Sequoias when she was having problems growing plants in her garden. She was so enthused by that first class; she decided to take more classes at COS. The re-entry student took 13 ornamental horticulture classes, worked at the campus nursery and earned four certificates. Now, nearing completion of her Associate of Science degree in Ornamental Horticulture, she is opening a business as a "landscape coach." She says she has never been happier and is committed to being a life-long learner.

When California native Melissa Christensen graduated from high school in 1980, she wasn't interested in college. "I couldn't get out of high school fast enough," said Christensen. "I thought college was for somebody else." She moved to the Midwest, got married and over the next several decades raised her family and worked part-time in customer service.

Although she had always been a gardener, when she moved to Tulare County in 2017, her garden failed to thrive. After searching for answers, it occurred to her to take a class at community college. **"In 2019, I enrolled in the Introduction to Horticultural Science class at COS," said Christensen. "The experience changed my life, my path and who I am today. One class was the springboard to so much more. And being a mature student didn't make any difference. Everyone was friendly and welcoming."**

Christensen credits her COS Ornamental Horticulture Instructor Fernando Fernandez with inspiring her. **"There isn't anybody better to learn about ornamental horticulture from than Mr. Fernandez," said Christensen. "He's magic; he is a truly supportive teacher and knows everyone in the industry. He loves what he does and prepares students for the outside world. COS is a leader in the nursery industry."**

Fernandez indicated that as a re-entry student, Christensen contributed a lot to her classes. "Mature students have the mental capacity to understand concepts from a real-life perspective," said Fernandez. "Although she was hesitant at first, Melissa brought a positive perspective gained from her life experience to team assignments. It was beneficial for other students to see that there are different ways of doing things and that they should analyze the course content from a broader perspective."

After that one class, the former apathetic high school student became an avid learner. "I started with the goal of learning to garden and better myself," said Christensen. "Once I started, I knew I had something and wanted more so I continued to enroll in ornamental horticulture classes. When the counselor asked me which certificate I wanted to earn, I told her I wanted to get four - Ornamental Horticulture, Landscape Design, Landscape Management and Retail Nursery."

Not surprisingly, her favorite class was taught by Fernandez. "Soil Science was my all-time favorite course," said Christensen. "Soil science is the foundation of ornamental horticulture. It is very important to know the pH, the soil



texture and test it for nutrients to successful grow plants.” With her passion for the subject, she eventually worked as a lab assistant in the soil’s lab.

She also worked at the COS Tulare Nursery to gain experience during the first semester. “Then, I became a part-time employee working at the nursery for three years,” said Christensen. “I worked in the nursery and greenhouse as well as helped students and community members find the right plants for their homes. I continue to learn from Mr. Fernandez, who runs the campus nursery, every time I’m there. Being a student worker allowed me to gain so much practical experience and the salary covered the cost of my tuition and supplies.”

Nursery student workers learn one step at a time, explained Fernandez. “I’d call Melissa a ‘wild card,’” said Fernandez. “She is a student who, with her years of campus nursery work experience, can plug in anywhere, anytime. She can easily multi-task to set up labs, guide visitors or manage irrigation systems.”

As part of the student experience, Christensen joined the Ornamental Horticulture and Ag Business clubs at COS. “Shannan Cooper, who teaches Ag Business, told me about the Collegiate Agriculture Leadership (CAL) Conference and CAL Competition where hundreds of students practice leadership and employment skills,” said Christensen. “The negative voices in my head made me doubt my chances but I wanted to win a prize for Mrs. Cooper who proudly displays past winners’ plaques in her office.”

The CAL competition proved to be a turning point. “Cosmo Costales, COS Career Technical Education (CTE) Success Coordinator, came into class offering employment resources,” said Christensen. “I sat down with Cosmo to update my resume and practice interviewing for the competition. I was so excited when I won first place in both the Interviewing and Sales Presentation categories for the COS team.”

During the ride back from the conference with the college team, someone asked her how close she was to getting a degree. “I was on a high from winning the two CAL Competition awards, when I realized that I was only 12 classes away from earning an associate degree,” said Christensen. “I knew I wasn’t a great student in high school so the gaps in my education, especially English and math, scared me.”

COS resources helped Christensen overcome the academic challenges. “There is help all around you at COS, you just have to reach out,” said Christensen. “When I ran into snags, I’d talk to my professors who offered guidance. The math and writing Tutoring Center offered great support. The student tutors are so patient and encouraging. I’d even do my homework there. The key is asking for help.”

Scott Rodgers also visited Christensen’s class to explain Student Success Center services. “Even though I was not in the student success program, he met with me, offered guidance and became a sounding board for me,” said Christensen. “When I dropped a class and needed another to maintain enough units to keep working at the nursery, he helped me shoehorn into a course. I ended up earning an A+.”

Christensen recommends that students take charge of their education. “If you are open to every opportunity, you can make it happen,” said Christensen. “The COS website is a gem; read through it and confirm everything yourself. Talk to your professors and ask for pointers. Read the syllabus, do the recommended reading, know your due dates and make flashcards to prepare for tests.”

Equipped with what she learned at COS, Christensen is now an independent horticulture consultant. “I work as a ‘landscape coach,’ guiding clients on improving their turf grass, identifying and choosing plants, landscape and irrigation design, testing soils and making plant recommendations. I love what I do so much and want to share what I’ve learned, while making money. I’d also like to work with underprivileged schools, introducing young people to growing plants and identifying insects.”

Fernandez explained that earning COS Ornamental Horticulture and Landscape Management Certificates provide a range of employment opportunities and an Associate of Science degree increases the pay range. "Horticulture students can start their own businesses, work in nursery management, for retail nurseries or at garden centers," said Fernandez. "Landscape management students can work as groundskeepers for schools and golf courses, as well as for irrigation and landscape contractors. We also prepare students to get licensed as Pest Control Advisors, which opens more doors. Some students transfer to university horticultural programs or to agriculture education programs to become teachers."

**Christensen believes COS changed her life for the better. "I will treasure my experience with COS for the rest of my life," said Christensen. "I am grateful that COS gave me a new level of confidence and belief that anything is possible. You just have to have the fire in the belly to go after it. The COS Horticulture program changed my life, my path and who I am today."**