

leading by DOING

Gina Falcetti built her career by embracing challenges head-on and is helping the next generation build theirs.

BY CHRIS MANNING

A career in horticulture wasn't Gina Falcetti's original plan. Growing up near Litchfield, Connecticut, Gina says she originally dreamed of being a veterinarian, but the cost was too high. Instead, fresh out of high school, she spent a short time working in a factory and then took a seasonal job at White Flower Farm to earn some money as she tried to figure out her career path. Instead, she fell in love.

"I immediately fell in love with plants," she says. "I've always been really hard working, so this worked for me."

"I'm a farmer at heart — I love plants, animals and the outdoors. I like to learn. I like variety. When you're in a factory, you're doing the same thing all day long. I was actually at a sewing factory making motorcycle luggage. I needed money, so I took that job. It wasn't long before I knew that wasn't going to work. With plants, I was actually interested."

After a short period of time in her seasonal position, Falcetti was approached by White Flower's then general manager, Heidi Heath, about applying for a full-time job in propagation.

"I said, 'but I don't have the qualifications,'" Gina recalls. "And she just said, 'just apply for it, Gina.' So I did and they gave it to me." In addition to Heidi, Gina credits three mentors at White Flower — David Smith, Michael Dodge and Arthur

Gilman, all three experienced nurserymen — for helping her navigate her new role in propagation.

"I was enjoying myself every day," she says. "I had people invested in me, challenging me."

She started in propagation during the 1980s. In learning on the job, Falcetti says she was able to work with perennials at a time when perennials weren't as popular as they are today and worked with nearly 900 different varieties.

"We did stratification of seeds and grafting and all kinds of unusual production methods, so it was a great place to learn a lot about plants and learn a lot about production." Just three years after taking on a role she wasn't sure she was ready for, Gina was promoted to head propagator.

Today, Gina is still a leader in her role — albeit on a different coast. She is currently the head liner grower at Skagit Horticulture, a wholesale operation based in Mount Vernon, Washington. And like Heidi, David, Michael and Arthur helped her, she works now to help the next generation of growers find their footing.

"You have to give people the tools, but you have to challenge people to get them interested," she says. "If you give people opportunities, they will continue to grow — even if they struggle."

Corey Hill, Skagit's operations manager, says Gina excels at blending personnel management and production management.

"She's so good at growing the best

product, but never at the detriment of her crew. She always goes to bat for her crew," Corey says.

Moving West

In late 1993, about nine years after starting at White Flower, Falcetti went to an event in Chicago where she was asked to make a presentation about producing perennials from seed. It was there that her career outlook changed.

At the event, she received a job offer to relocate to Washington and work at Summer Sun Greenhouses, a large operation producing bedding plants and hanging baskets. When Gina came on board, they were beginning to launch a perennials division with an agreement in place with Ball Seed. (Summer Sun was later sold to Color Point and renamed Etera, but no longer is operational.)

Looking back, she says there was some "fate" involved because of where she was at in her life. She was in a relationship that wasn't working out and she needed to move on. She was also still living where she had grown up and was looking for a new challenge.

"I had met Carl Loeb at this event and he said, 'I'm going to send you a plane ticket and have you come out' and all of this stuff," she says. "I went home just hoping they were going to call and that this was a real option for me. ... I'm not a very fearful person. But I gave myself a week to go out, check out the job and see if it was for me."

When she went out West, Gina says



GINA FALCETTI

she hit it off with her prospective bosses and was intrigued by the job, perhaps enough to take it on her own merits. But, perhaps more importantly, Gina spent most of her week exploring what would become her new home in the Pacific Northwest. She went to the beach, the mountains and various parks to see if the surrounding environment fit what she was looking for. It did.

“It was a beautiful place and I felt I could do the job, even if it could be a challenge,” she says.

Three weeks later, she moved across the country to her new job and new environment without a solid plan.

“Two suitcases and a cat,” she says with a laugh. “I flew and I left everything. Part of [being able to do this] was my personality, but also my parents and my upbringing. My dad said, ‘Gina, if you don’t do this, you’re never going to know. You have the courage to make changes.’ So it’s partly me, but it’s my upbringing in that we were taught to be hardworking and take opportunities when they arise.”

Building a career and life

Once she moved to the region in 1994, she’s never looked back.

“I love the climate,” she says. “Being an outdoors person, I love the mountains and the ocean — it’s great to have it close. And it’s great for growing plants. Overall, it’s pretty temperate where we are here along the Puget Sound.”

Her career in the region has also seen its share of changes, including the sale of Summer Sun and the closure of Etera. But at Etera, she was able to travel to Germany to learn more about plant production and get her name out in the industry, specifically in her new home region.

Just two days after Etera filed for bankruptcy, Skagit Gardens called her and offered her a job. She immediately said yes. She’s had several jobs there, but primarily has focused on new products and stock management.

“It was a lot of exposure to new things,” she says. “This part of my career was all about plants. I had a few employees, but it was more interacting with breeders and



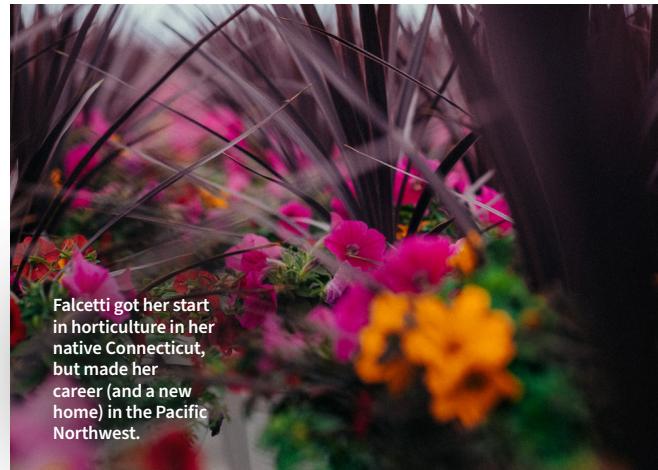
“If you go and find her in the greenhouse, there’s always a lot of people wanting to pick her brain,” says Debbie Thorne, Skagit’s head of sales.

with the plants directly.” She stayed in that role until 2013, when she started looking away from Skagit for a new challenge. That included an interview with (and offer from) Center Greenhouses in Colorado.

“I just had a bad feeling about leaving the Pacific Northwest,” she says. “I had this gut feeling that I shouldn’t.” At the 11th hour, an old boss, Bruce Gibson, called her to join Northwest Horticulture and stay in the Pacific Northwest. As it so happened, Northwest Horticulture was housed on the old Etera property.

Then, in 2014, Northwest merged with Skagit Gardens, and she’s been with Skagit ever since. And over time she transitioned away from new product development and into her current propagation focus with more managerial responsibilities. This past year, that involved Skagit shipping plants the week of Easter for the first time.

Gina doesn’t envision working forever, saying she doesn’t want to “hold her ground” and prevent other people from having the opportunities she’s had. She’ll turn 60 in 2022. There’s a family she’d like to spend



Falcetti got her start in horticulture in her native Connecticut, but made her career (and a new home) in the Pacific Northwest.

more time with. She’s also a passionate vegetable gardener who grows most of her own food and has interest in running her own CSA during retirement. She also works with a horse rescue program in her spare time.

“It’s not that I don’t want to work,” she says. “I just want to have more time for those things. When you’re a grower, you have no time. You work weekends, holidays, all the time. I want to pass off responsibility to capable people so I have more time to do what I want to do.”

Leadership by example

Amanda Milner, one of the head growers responsible for finished products at Skagit,



“Gina is probably the most passionate person about the greenhouse industry that I have met,” Amanda Milner says.

has been at the grower for two years now. She didn't meet Gina until she started at Skagit, but now views her as a mentor.

“Gina is probably the most passionate person about the greenhouse industry that I have met,” Amanda says. “It's not just a love of plants, but she wants to see everyone and every process we have exceed its potential. She's the kind of person that I rarely hear say she has a problem or an issue; it's usually offering up three different solutions.”

“It's a really refreshing, positive view. She's energetic, she's upbeat. And she has so much knowledge. She took me under her wing when I started and not only showed me the ropes with finished [product], but also mentoring me with propagation and making sure that I'm fully aware of how things work here,” Amanda says.

Similar to Gina, Amanda came to Skagit as the new grower in a new environment. On top of that, Amanda started her new role during the COVID-19 pandemic. She, in her own words, says the on-boarding process was a “bit overwhelming.”

“She took the time to not only make sure I felt good about my day-to-day, but also made sure I knew people in the company, and she'd take me around to introduce me to the people that I'd need to talk to get things done,” Amanda says. “She made sure I felt steady and comfortable and excited to

come to work like she is.”

Corey, Skagit's operations manager, describes Gina as the exact kind of employee every operation needs: transparent, hard-working and never needs to be worried about.

“There's never surprises,” he says. “She's really good at looking forward, she's really good at planning. And when she has an issue, she always brings a solution with it. She comes with ideas about how to fix an issue but is also open to other options. I feel like I never get blindsided by Gina.”

According to Corey, Gina's communication is the “most important” trait to provides, both as a part of the Skagit team, but for others to look to and learn from.

“Many of our inefficiencies come from that last-minute panic or not being prepared for what we walk into,” Corey explains. “We can deal with a lot when we know it's coming. We can figure stuff out. But if the problem comes without time to implement a solution, it's a problem. Gina keeps us working ahead.”

Gina's communication extends to working with anyone at Skagit, from someone just starting out like Amanda to someone with decades of experience, according to Corey

“Gina builds trust quickly. She's honest with everyone. She expects a lot, but gives lots and lots of support,” he says. “That helps her build a very strong team.”

“If you go and find her in the greenhouse, there's always a lot of people wanting to pick her brain,” says Debbie Thorne, Skagit's head of sales. “In our industry, there's not always a lot of experience that comes in. Even with people who have no experience, Gina helps build them up.

With Amanda, that involves helping her transition to a specific role. Gina is trying to move away from some of her young plant responsibilities to give Amanda her own chance to run that department. At the same time, Gina will move into a production manager role where she will focus more on people than plants.

“It's time, right?” Gina says. “It's time for a younger person to take that responsibility. And it's great to have someone like Amanda ready to step into that role. And at the same time, we need a production manager. So I'm looking at everything going on and what gaps we have and am just thinking ‘oh let me try it. I think I can do this.’”

“To be a great supervisor,” Gina says, “you have to have the same expectations for yourself that you have for others. You have to be willing to work as hard as you expect people to work and be reliable and available. There's nothing worse than a boss that's never around when you need them and doesn't match your effort.”