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Laura Deeter Trains Plant Detectives



Dr. Laura Deeter created the CSI/ATI plant scavenger hunt for the final exam in her herbaceous plants course.

Ohio State alum **Laura M. Deeter** might be mistaken for an expert in forensic studies, rather than an herbaceous plant specialist. That's because she has been known to "hire" students to be forensic horticulturists, working to solve a series of mock murders using evidence found on victims' bodies. The evidence is bits of plants and seeds, and the "victims" are faculty and staff members who agree to play dead for the occasion.

An Assistant Professor of Horticultural Technologies, [Dr. Deeter](#) dreamed up the scenario for the final exam in her herbaceous plants course last year at Ohio State's [Agricultural Technical Institute](#) in Wooster. "The students have to identify the plants and try to reconstruct the possible pathway the murderer may have taken through the grounds," she says. "It gives them some experience that is hard to replicate in the classroom."



Laura Deeter encourages her students to develop a curiosity about plants and a healthy respect for the diversity of plant life.

OSU Horticulture & Crop Science Department educated, Deeter (MS 1995, PhD 2002) outlines the bodies with chalk and assembles a series of notes, supposedly from the murderer, that describe the plants. Students work in pairs to unravel the mystery. For an added touch, Deeter named the event: CSI/ATI (Crime Scene Investigation/Agricultural Technical Institute), a takeoff on the popular television law enforcement series. "It was essentially a scavenger hunt," says Deeter about last year's test. "The students loved it.

None had ever taken an exam like that before."

While it was obviously fun, the students also had to work hard to solve the crime. "Some of them even wrote little notes back to me, discussing possible motives and making guesses about the crime," she says. For anyone who knows Deeter and her teaching style, the idea of a crime-investigation final exam comes as no surprise. She is always on the lookout for ways to make the subject matter fun and interesting for her students, she says. "That also makes it more interesting for me."

Deeter recently was among the 10 winners of Ohio State's [2006 Alumni Award for Distinguished Teaching](#), for which she was nominated by present and former students as well as colleagues. "She finds unique ways of making students want to learn and feel a kinship with her," one student commented.



HCS alum and Horticulture Technologies Assistant Professor at ATI, Dr. Laura Deeter earned the 2006 Ohio State University Alumni Award for Distinguished Teaching.

But Deeter did not originally plan to teach. As an undergraduate at Ohio State, she enrolled in the obligatory speech class - and unlike most of the students, fell in love with public speaking. "I knew I had to find a way to be able to do that as a career," she says.

"Another professor suggested teaching - and graduate school." That became the path she chose. She became an assistant professor of horticulture technologies at ATI in 2000, while she was working on her Ph.D. "They gave me the opportunity to concentrate more on the teaching, but not ignore the research," she says. Today, in addition to the herbaceous plants class, she teaches courses on plant identification, plant production, and outdoor gardening.

Deeter's research time is primarily devoted to work on a trial garden. "We take different species, and we plant them and evaluate them and see how they do," she says. "We mainly want to see if they are hardy in Ohio." For instance, she designed a bulb garden specifically to determine within how many days certain bulbs will flower in Ohio. Deeter's research has relevance for landscapers, growers, and

designers - the career choices of many of her students.

Although studying plants is clearly her life's work, Deeter would be unhappy without the people connection. "The best thing about teaching is interacting with the students," she says. "That's why I keep an open-door policy" - and many of them take her up on the offer.

Most of all, Deeter wants her students to walk away with a curiosity about plants and a healthy respect for the diversity of plant life. If they leave school with the desire to figure things out on their own, she knows she has done her job. "I love it when students come and say, 'I was at work and I was able to answer that question,'" she says. "You know that you had a small hand in that."

To watch and listen to a Laura Deeter lecture on Water Gardening or Fabulous Annuals, please visit the [ABE Center Educational Podcast Series](#).

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