

## Tillery Street Plant Company Interview w/ Melissa Hagen (Houseplant Manager)

**\*\*Melissa Hagen is the Houseplant Manager at Tillery Street Plant Company. She's been with Tillery Street for four-years now and is a true to-the-bone plant lover. She's currently helping put together their new and bigger greenhouse! She's helping design the inside and making sure that it will become a place not only filled with plants but one that people can enjoy and become inspired to create a jungle of their own.\*\***

Is some pre-talk about the weather today

**ME: My first question is your normal one about when did Tillery Street get started?**

MELISSA: So...it was before my time! That would be a good question for Jon (the owner) if you wanted to email him. They started out here about 7 years ago and they had a business before this, "Flora bunda". I started here about 4 years ago. It was very different, it was much smaller. It was a little trailer that is Jon's office now and not much else. We had this Greenhouse and East Austin was here but it was much quieter, like, one employee could work alone all day and be fine. It's grown a lot since then. The neighborhood has grown immensely in the last 4 years, it's incredible. So, we're kind of responding to that and filling peoples needs. There is a lot of people who live in houses who don't have yards, and condos, they have indoor space but don't necessarily have outdoor space. We've been doing a lot more houseplants in the beginning because there is a lot more people seeking that and bringing that inside.

**ME: That's cool. Was it originally this plot of land or did ya'll start buying more land and stuff?**

MELISSA: He was looking to have us expand but Tillery has always been on this land. The business before this I think was on South Lamar?

**ME: Wow, that's like the opposite direction!**

MELISSA: Yeah, I think it was on South Lamar but you can double check that with him and fact check me.

**ME: Haha. I also read, does that East Austin rent out the spot here?**

MELISSA: Uh-huh! So, when we first started, basically what kept us in business when we were smaller was we had a landscaping company that did huge massive jobs. So, we would get huge shipments of plants here and meet here, their office is here next door and then they would go do their jobs and that would pay all our bills. Also, Eric he's helped us. He's the owner of East Austin Succulents and he rents out from us. It's been another way to help us get by in the beginning but it's a very nice merging that I think people can come to one spot and get so many different varieties. It gets really confusing for some people though too!

**ME: \*\*giggling (of course!)\*\***

MELISSA: Tillery and East Austin get tagged in each others Instagrams. We get emails for each other. We get phone calls for each other lately because they've turned their phone system off, so they don't take calls anymore.

**\*\*customer checks out\*\***

ME: How do ya'll get all of your plants? Because I saw once in a post that they come in boxes and everything.

MELISSA: Yay! So, it depends on where we order them from.

\*\*customer coming super excited for a new plant\*\*

\*\*question repeated\*\*

MELISSA: Ok! It depends on where they come from. Sometimes they're from local nurseries and they'll pile them into trucks and trailers and they can drive them over or we can go pick them up or sometimes they deliver them in box trucks. If they come from really far away places like California, Arizona, or Florida they ship them in big trucks, like 18-wheelers, they come in boxes if they are smaller more delicate plants, like houseplants come all boxed and sleeved to protect them. Sometimes they're in that truck from three to five to six and seven eight days in the dark sometimes. They try to make the shipment fast but not everything is perfect, you know? If they come REALLY big, like sometimes the plants are so big we have to unload them with forklifts and it's A LOT of manual labor. It's trucks with THOUSANDS of plants. In the spring, so many trucks everyday, thousands of plants. It's crazy!

ME: Are there local nurseries, like around here in peoples backyards, or are there like local business' selling their stuff?

MELISSA: The people selling to us?

ME: Yeah.

MELISSA: They are primarily whole sale growers and nurseries, they have to be certified.

ME: Oh! ok. So that way you know the plant isn't polluted or something.

MELISSA: Especially with food or edible things, there are some things that are important. Also anything with citrus, they have a lot of restrictions on shipping from the Valley to up here because of the diseases that can effect them. The state kind of has it on lock-down. Like, you can't ship out of Texas and you can't ship on to Texas. It's very restrict. So, they come here and check all of our lemon trees and make sure they have the tags on them so they are able to trace where they came from.

ME: That's pretty cool. I didn't know any of that. Ya'll were talking about expanding. Do you have any plans to expand out of here or just here?

MELISSA: My boss really likes San Antonio and kind of has been looking around San Antonio just to see what's going on down there, but that is still very much in the future. Right now the expansion is this Greenhouse. It's going to expand our space a lot.

ME: It is really big. It's definitely way bigger than I thought it was going to be.

MELISSA: I know and now we have to fill it with tables and things and plants!

ME: You'll be able to sit in there?

MELISSA: Yay! We're going to make it really cool. We want to make a little seating area for photoshoots or something. And have a pond we're working on, Danny over there is going to help me get all these, we're still in the planning process, but these tree columns to let plants grow up and we just want it to look really jungly and awesome.

ME: I'm definitely going to have to come back and take my pictures then.

MELISSA: Yay it's going to be really cool. \*whispers\* it's like an art project.

ME: \*giggles\* When is this suppose to be actually done?

MELISSA: It's hard to say because it'll probably be done Friday of next week and then we have to do the inside. We have some ideas for the floor that isn't just the tarp and if we do the pond we have to figure that out. We have to figure out the water lines and the gas getting installed, and there is a wet wall. There is a lot of technical details to deal with before we can even think of the fun things. But it's going to be a minute.

\*\*technical project discussion and plant shipping talk and about their 20% blow-out\*\*

ME: What is your most rewarding thing about working here?

MELISSA: Oh, it's really easy to work here because I love it. You know, I feel like I'm really lucky because I lucked into it and just knew people who knew people around here and I didn't have much experience when I started. It's just really satisfying. I'm a people person, so I like to help people. We started doing the houseplant classes and I get to teach people how to keep their house plants alive which makes me really happy because I love all my plants. It's just so many aspects of the job that brings me joy. When I get to go see peoples gardens. When I get to go see peoples nurseries and private collections and just see these incredible rare plants that you just never get to see unless you went to crazy parts of the world because they brought them from those places. It's just really exciting to me because I LOVE plants and it's fun because I love talking to people about plants. It just makes it a lot easier.

ME: I'm very jealous.

MELISSA: Yay, I feel very lucky. I didn't plan it, you never plan it, it kind of has taken over and I love it.

ME: That's awesome. What do you think makes ya'll different than other greenhouses and nurseries around here?

MELISSA: \*whispers\* we're more punk rock...

ME: \*giggles\* Ya'll definitely have a more Austin vibe going on compared to other nurseries.

MELISSA: We're younger than other nurseries too. I feel like some nurseries cater to what side of town they are on. There is just some demographics on different sides of town and the East Side is very young and hip and I think that my staff reflects that.

ME: You do and ya'll are all very inviting.

MELISSA: We do and we all love plants and are different kinds of artists, musicians. They all have their different niches too and everyone has the things that they're into, plant wise. So we know that if someone comes to you with a question that you don't know about that there is other people that you can ask. It gives us greater knowledge when you group us all together. I think that we are pretty well connected too, just through the instagram. I think our social media game is really strong. We try to respond to all the messages, even though we get a whole lot. Also have interesting content and just highlight who we are and we are not the same people

running all the other nurseries we are kind of more artists I think. You know the front of this building was painting by one of my employees. We all have different strengths.

ME: That's awesome. If there was one impact you could leave on Austin or your customers, what would it be?

MELISSA: Oh, you know. I want them all to have beautiful jungle homes. There has been a lot of people coming to the houseplant class, we've only been doing that for about a year, but hundreds of people have come over the last year and we have some planned for this year. The one that we did a "brew house brewery" two or three weeks ago, standing room only, got so full they weren't letting people in or out. No one else could fit in, it was FULL! And I want all those people to go home with the knowledge that empowers them to try and have more plants and experiment with more plants and have all the joy that my plants bring in their lives. Is what I would want them to have. It's interesting because people today are so separated from nature so to be able keep things alive it's like a bond, it's like a pet. All of my plants are like my babies. So, I want people to have that same joy that I experience.

ME: That's cool. I have my last question. For beginner Gardeners and plant lovers what would be a great houseplant or plant for them to start out with?

MELISSA: For beginner Gardeners who want to grow plants, inside, I'll start with. I would recommend snake plants.

\*\*points to a variant i don't have and i point to the one that I have\*\*

MELISSA: That one is really common and just so reliable and easy and great for your air, you know, really forgiving. Pothos and philodendron vines are also really easy. Pothos plants can get really long and you can do really cool things when your plants get really long and they are very easy to take care of, they don't need much attention. Peace Lilies of course are very classic. And all those plants come in so many different colors and varieties and shapes. The pothos has a silver that is really gorgeous.

\*\*i wrongly point to a silver pothos plant, it's silver but a philodendron\*\*

MELISSA: You learn about plants by experiencing them and you have them. I am really lucky because I can always just exchange my plants. I'm like: Umm..this isn't working! And I'll take it back and figure something else out. For outside growing in Texas, you should grow salvia they do really well and flower in the sun. You should grow wildflowers.

\*\*customer coming in for a price check\*\*

MELISSA: Milkweed is important to grow for the monarchs that travel through. It's really easy, it's called a weed for a reason, it grows super easily. And you know it kind of depends on your space and what you want to grow. I was suggesting wildflowers but not everyone has that much space outside. but if you only have some containers you could do some tomatoes in your container, which you know is summer and you'd have to water a lot, but you can eat them you know. There is a lot of things that you can grow here that really aren't that hard if you just have a little bit of knowledge and people are always welcome to come in and kind of pick our brains and we help them figure out what is right for their space and we will be honest, cause sometimes people want impossible things.

ME: That does make sense. I lied, I do have one more question. What's your craziest thing to have happened here?

MELISSA: \*laughs\* Umm...the craziest thing to have happened here? There is a couple things that come to mind. Ummm...it's kind of weird, this guy came, it's crazy. This guy came and loaded up a cart full of plants and then the girl from East Austin came over and was like, where did that guy go? He had a cart full of plants and we didn't ring him up, did you ring him up? Like, have you seen him? And he was gone! And he stole the plants! And then she was livid because it was a lot of their plants, big plants, expensive plants, whatever, a cart full. And then he came back....and was parked right outside of the front gate and it was still some of the plants that he had gotten from before like cactus spines were falling over in his back seat with dirt everywhere. The back was just dirt and laying down cactuses and he came back for more. He was clearly not well, I think he was on drugs. The guy from next door, when he tried to leave with more cactus, the guy from next door walked over and pulled his keys out of his ignition and was like, nope you're not leaving you're waiting for the police. It was crazy. It was really crazy, he got arrested. Yay, we went real dark. Not a lot of crazy things really happen here so it surprises me when they do because generally everyone who comes here is really happy and in a good mood. The kind of people who come to see plants are a certain kind of people, and most of them are pretty cool. So, we don't have too much riff-raff.

ME: That's good though.

MELISSA: I did have the police come one day. \*laughs\* I was walking out the greenhouse, I was the only one here because it was after we had closed but I had stayed to water things. I had looked up and the police were hopping over the front gate and he was walking towards me and I was like, how did he even get in the nursery? And I was like, Hello! I was so confused as to why a police officer was walking towards me. Apparently someone, my co-worker, had to hop over the front gate for some reason and someone had called that they has seen him hopping in and thought he was breaking in so the police came and broke-in. \*laughs\*

ME: That's nice. At least someone called though.

MELISSA: That was pretty crazy too, I was so confused.