



Triton College

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Triton College Graduate Turns Over New Leaf, Finds Love for Horticulture



Triton College graduate Nicole Molinaro has discovered a calling for horticulture and environmental advocacy. Seeking a new career, Molinaro enrolled in Triton at age 40 and changed her life.

RIVER GROVE, III. — After leaving behind a career in insurance, recent Triton College graduate Nicole Molinaro of Westchester is turning over a new leaf.

Since earning an associate degree in horticulture, Molinaro has discovered a new passion and made a name for herself in her community as a dedicated champion for greenspace and preserving the nature around us.

Molinaro admits she didn't know what horticulture was before enrolling in Triton's program, but once she joined, she said it "flipped a switch."

“I didn’t expect I would find a new purpose,” she said. “But every class I took opened me up to a new outlook on how horticulture can impact my life. Not only can I use what I’ve learned for a career, but I can also use this knowledge to make my community better.”

After nearly two decades in commercial insurance underwriting, Molinaro sought a more fulfilling career that would also offer flexibility as a new mother. Inspired by a flyer about Triton’s program, she decided to “sow a seed” for her future.

“I think community colleges are a great way to explore pathways at a low cost,” she said.

Since graduating in May, Molinaro has become active in her community, promoting green infrastructure and sustainable horticulture. In 2022, she helped form the Green Residents of Westchester, an ecological commission that meets monthly and serves to advise and educate the Village of Westchester while working to preserve its natural resources.

She was elected last spring to the Proviso Township High School Board of Education, where she advocates for expanded greenspace and diverse career opportunities for students. Molinaro also coordinates the community garden at the Quinn Center of St. Eulalia in Maywood, which provides fresh produce to local residents.

“People don’t always understand the role that nature plays in improving your physical and mental health,” she said. “For me, it’s really been empowering to use science and data to advocate for this balance between gray and green infrastructure, because municipalities often have this hyper-focus on the gray and don’t always think about the functionality and long-term financial benefits of beautifying our public spaces.”

Triton’s Horticulture Program equips students with the skills to enter positions in agriculture, landscape design, grounds maintenance, cannabis cultivation, greenhouse and garden center management, and sustainable horticulture.

Students learn under the tutelage of Horticulture Program Chair Samuel Schmitz, a Chicago native of Jefferson Park with 25 years of experience in landscaping. Schmitz said his courses are unique in that many of them comprise students of diverse age ranges and professional backgrounds. Some might be fresh out of high school, seeking a career in landscaping. Others, like Molinaro, may be starting a new career. And other learners, some older than Schmitz, just want to learn to improve their own garden at home.

“It’s so cool to have these different perspectives,” he said. “There’s times when it feels like I’m not teaching a class, but rather I’m having an insightful conversation with peers.”

Interested in horticulture? Activate your green thumb and get your hands dirty by growing food and plants in Triton College’s greenhouse; discover the wonders of the insects that crawl and buzz around us; and learn all about the impact that access to fresh produce and food equity has on cities.

Learn more about Triton College’s Horticulture Program at [Triton.edu](https://www.triton.edu).

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ABOUT TRITON COLLEGE

Triton College is an institution of higher education dedicated to student success. Triton offers more than 120 degree and certificate programs designed for students to realize their career aspirations and effectively compete in a global economy. The college campus spans 110 acres in River Grove, Illinois, holds classes at satellite locations and offers online learning opportunities. Triton's exemplary faculty and staff work to provide high-quality, convenient and affordable educational opportunities to more than 10,000 students each year. Triton College is a member of The Community Colleges of Illinois and accredited by the Higher Learning Commission. Learn more at triton.edu.