



by Suzanne Howard

"I'm Not Cinderella"

Biosystems engineer works for Disney World

Cynthia Meeusen's future career path may have been inspired by a Walt Disney documentary on the Land Pavilion that she saw when she was 12 years old. She observed how Disney grew some of the plants and, after watching the documentary, she went into her mom's kitchen, pulled everything off the table, and proceeded to make her own pavilion. It was her "laboratory" for the entire summer, much to her mother's chagrin.

Meeusen was always interested in science and math and decided to pursue engineering at Michigan State University. She wasn't sure what specific field of engineering to go into until she had the opportunity to take a biosystems class. The professor of that class was ASAE member Evangelyn Alocilja.

"It was encouraging to me to see a woman teaching the class. She was doing some interesting projects, and I just got more and more involved," says Meeusen. "Since I liked biology as much as the hard sciences, biosystems engineering seemed a good mesh," adds Meeusen.

While finishing up her degree, Meeusen presented her thesis at an ASAE Annual International Meeting. She had the opportunity to meet representatives from Epcot Center who were attending the meeting. She talked with them and gave them a copy of her resumé. They called her, she flew down for an interview, and got a job.

Meeusen works in the Land Greenhouses at Epcot Center in Orlando, Fla. On a day-to-day basis, she is involved in electrical and/or computer engineering.

"One problem with my degree in biosystems engineering is that people don't know what it is," says Meeusen. "I tell them I'm an electrical engineer in a biological environment," she adds.

There are four show greenhouses open to the public and 10 backstage work greenhouses. The four showcase greenhouses include a tropical dome, a temperate greenhouse, a greenhouse production, and a creative greenhouse.

"People are very curious, very interested in the greenhouses. We get a very good response from people who come through them," says Meeusen.

"We try and bring in technology from around the world and showcase the newest agricultural technology that is out there. We do a lot of research as to what new innovations come along and can we adapt it to the greenhouses," says Meeusen.

The public's favorite greenhouse is the creative one. "Kids love it," says Meeusen. "We have aeroponic and hydroponic plants, roots hanging out in the air, flying squash. Some of the roots hang down five feet. The kids think it's magic," she adds.



ASAE member Cynthia Meeusen is a biosystems engineer in the Land Greenhouses at Epcot Center in Disney World.

Meeusen loves researching a project, doing a design, and then actually seeing it and the reaction of the guests. "People are pleased or their jaws drop," says Meeusen. "I'm always learning. It's a lot of fun."

One of the challenges she faces is being the only engineer in her department. When she needs collaboration, she goes to the larger Disney engineering department for technical advice. She says that her relatively young age and being a female in a mostly male profession can feel like a barrier at first. "Sometimes the other staff seem surprised to see me

in the role I have. Once I get to know and work with them, however, they are great," she says.

Meeusen says that agricultural engineering offers a lot of opportunities. "Make sure you really enjoy the core sciences that you are working towards," she advises prospective students. "Pick a field that you think is neat and you find interesting. Take a hobby and try to relay that into something you can do as a career."

Meeusen has never regretted going into the sciences. She loves working for Disney.

When her friends find out where she works, they want to know if she has a spare bedroom. "People think it's pretty neat that I work at Disney. They are surprised that I'm an engineer. They expect me to be dressed up as one of the Disney characters. I tell them I'm not Cinderella," she laughs. ■