

Plant Talk with Planthropology – S2E14

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:00:08] Hello. Welcome to a Talk on the Wild Side, your biweekly tour of all things Wild in Texas. I'm your host. I'm Sandra Rideout-Hanzak.

Andrew Lowery [00:00:17] And I'm Andrew Lowery. Howdy. Howdy.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:00:20] Hey, Andrew, what's up? What's new this time?

Andrew Lowery [00:00:24] You know, there's all sorts of new stuff. Dr. Rideout, the weather is beautiful outside. It is the perfect temperature. Shorts and t shirts. Weather.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:00:35] A lot of folks down here would say that you're crazy, but, yes, a lot of folks are bundling up with jackets. It's that weekend where you have to find your jacket.

Andrew Lowery [00:00:45] Your storage bin that's in the back of the closet. You're like, oh, don't get to wear these too much. But now is the time to bust them out. So, okay. So yeah, we do have something new. This episode. As of November 3rd, Texas Parks and Wildlife has banned oyster fishing in several oyster fishing bays, the most notably being the Mesquite Bay complex.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:01:05] Oh, wow. Okay, so what is Mesquite Bay Complex?

Andrew Lowery [00:01:08] So the Mesquite Bay Complex includes Carlos Bay, Mesquite and Arroyo Bay.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:01:14] All right. That sounds like a large area. Are these places being shut down for conservation purposes? What's the reason?

Andrew Lowery [00:01:22] Yes. Well, Texas Parks and Wildlife actually created a task force to investigate the need to shut down certain oyster fisheries for the time being. They found that, sadly, it was necessary, and as of now, only nine out of 29 oyster harvesting areas are still open.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:01:37] Wow. Okay. So imagine a lot of people are being affected by that. Oyster fishermen and women that depend on these areas.

Andrew Lowery [00:01:46] Absolutely. There were actually a series of protests that occurred recently up in Austin for that exact thing. A lot of people are saying that they're going to have large scale layoffs. They're not going to be able to keep operations or their doors open. It's a tough situation and it's always a tough decision any time you have a conservation professional that's having to make those calls. But we really do trust in Texas Parks and Wildlife Department to maintain those natural resources and make sure that, you know, they're available to another generation of fishermen. And I got to say, I quite like oysters myself, so I'm very thankful that they're making sure there's going to be some next year and the year after and the year after that, you know?

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:02:24] Me, too. I love oysters and I would hate for us to eat them all this year. Because I want I want some in future years. But yeah, sometimes, you know, being a wildlife biologist sounds like all fun and games and Bambi and you

know, that sort of thing. But sometimes it's really hard. These guys sometimes have to make some unpopular decisions. That's really sad for those people. Certainly that's got to be tough for people when their livelihoods are affected.

Andrew Lowery [00:02:52] Yeah, I can only imagine. And you know, our thoughts and positive wishes goes out to everyone who is involved.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:02:58] Positive vibes, definitely.

Andrew Lowery [00:03:00] So, Dr. Rideout, who do we have the privilege of interviewing today?

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:03:05] Okay. Well, today we have a really fun guest. His name is Vikram Baliga, and he is with Texas Tech University. He's got his own podcast and he's doing his own cool stuff. So and we'll hear more about that later. But first, before we do that, I just want to thank our listeners. We've got a lot of listeners who hear every episode and they tune in every single time. And we've got some people who just tune in once, once or twice now and then as the topic is interesting to them. And that's great too. But I want to thank everybody who's listening. We know that time is the most precious thing that you have. And so we thank you for spending your life minutes with us every once in a while. Thank you. Well, I'm here today with Dr. Vikram Baliga of Texas Tech University. Hi Vikram. How are you?

Dr. Vikram Baliga [00:03:56] I am doing pretty well. How are you today?

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:03:58] I'm doing well. I'm so glad that you could get together with us. I've been a big fan of your podcast, too, and I'm sure you'll tell us about that pretty soon. But I've been a big fan of your podcast anthropology for a while, so it's really fun to get to talk to you. And while we're at it, why don't you just go ahead and introduce yourself to our listeners.

Dr. Vikram Baliga [00:04:20] Yeah, sure. And I appreciate you having me on. I know we've been trying to coordinate this for a little while, and it's nice to finally start with you and appreciate the kind words as well. So, yeah, I'm Vikram Malik. I have a Ph.D. in horticulture and a couple of other degrees in horticulture, too. I've studied plants for quite a while and I am a lecturer reporter culture here in the Department of Political Science at Texas Tech, I run our greenhouse and horticultural gardens on campus. What else? I. I've done a lot of work in landscapes and water conservation and sort of small acreage, food production. That's been kind of my focus for most of my career. And I have a couple of podcasts, one called Planthropology and then one that I recorded with our public media folks here at Texas Tech called In the Grow.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:05:13] Really did not know?

Dr. Vikram Baliga [00:05:15] Yeah. So we it's a weekly podcast. It airs here locally on our NPR affiliate. So yeah, that one is yeah, we're doing it, gosh, a little over a year now, I think. And I can't remember exactly when we started, actually. And we do just home gardening tips. Shorter episodes.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:05:33] Nice.

Dr. Vikram Baliga [00:05:34] Yeah, it's more that one's more like locally focused on West Texas. But, you know, we try to talk about things that are applicable outside of that as well.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:05:43] Sure. And then what's that one called? "In the Grow"?

Dr. Vikram Baliga [00:05:46] Yep. Yeah. So if you're in if you're in Lubbock or the Lubbock area, it's like 98.1 FM. It's also it also airs in El Paso, I believe, or it gets it gets syndicated through El Paso. But I'm not exactly sure what the radio station is there, but you can get it in a couple of places.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:06:07] Okay, cool. So you run the greenhouse and you do these podcasts, which I can't believe you have to. That's crazy, because I have a hard time keeping up with the one. What do you do in your greenhouse or what's a day in the life look like for you?

Dr. Vikram Baliga [00:06:24] Oh, it depends very much on the day we are. So it's primarily a teaching facility. So we have about so we have eight greenhouse compartments. Each one is just over 2000 square feet. So they're fairly large greenhouses. So we've got 16 or 18,000 square feet of greenhouse space, plus four classrooms and three and a half acres of horticultural garden that surround it. So I manage the whole facility, including the garden. We teach our interior horticulture labs here, as well as entomology, weed science, turf, grass, floral design, plant materials. So, so a variety of labs and classes, based out here. So, you know, on an average week, during a normal semester, whatever that means, any more, we'll run five, 600 students in this greenhouse a week. Wow. So it stays busy. We do undergraduate research here as well as graduate student research. So, you know, about half our facility is strictly like undergraduate education focused. We have plants that we use to teach plant materials and the propagation methods and everything else.

Dr. Vikram Baliga [00:07:44] And then we have some more dedicated research space, but it's still, you know, focused on teaching grad students how to do research in this kind of space. So it's busy, it's variable. I never have probably two of the same days in a row. And but it keeps things interesting. It's fun.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:08:03] Yeah, well, it sounds like fun and very busy. That's a lot. So one of your big focus areas with your career has been working on multipurpose landscapes. And I'm wondering if you can, you know, just give us like a short 411 about that what's going on with multipurpose landscapes that we need to know.

Dr. Vikram Baliga [00:08:30] It's not I'm not going to say it is a new landscape idea. It's actually a very old landscape idea that's gaining like popularity again these days.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:08:42] So everything old is new again, that sort of thing.

Dr. Vikram Baliga [00:08:46] That's kind of where it seems like we're going with a lot of things, especially in our industry, in our, you know, in our field. But the basic idea is that, you know, we use our space for more than one thing. It's pretty much exactly what it sounds like. And that's one of the resources that in a lot of ways is the least renewable, is space, is arable, grow the land and as cities get bigger and urbanization even in traditionally agricultural communities like this one around love it. You know, we have 300,000 people here now and we're projected to gain another hundred thousand in the

next 10 to 15 years. So it's becoming a large, you know, sort of urban area. We had to figure out how to feed all these people. And since and. One of the messages I like to send is I talked about conservation and water and other resources. It's not that we shouldn't use the resource, but that we should use it as efficiently as possible. So as we develop cities, we still want public green spaces, urban green spaces that look good, home gardens look good, home landscapes look good because it raises property value and improves quality of life, all these things. But if we could also grow food in the process, like we're kind of killing two birds with one stone and we're feeding more people, and every gallon of water we put out is serving more than one purpose. Yeah. And so that that's kind of how I look at it, that we're taking the space and the resources we have and we're doing as many things with it as possible.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:10:25] Yeah. So I have a question about that because I've tried to do this in the past and I'm not very good at it, but I've tried. I love to garden and flowers and I have flowers for butterflies and birds and all that good stuff because I'm into wild things too. And so, in my front yard, I'll put tomatoes and peppers in there and stuff. And then it just looks like, like if you come to my door, it's like, Oh, hey, you've got a pepper in your flower garden. I'm not very good at integrating it and making it look good. What kind of advice do you have for people who want to do that but want to make it look good too, and make it pretty?

Dr. Vikram Baliga [00:11:06] I think about landscaping in general, zoning things in your own garden is kind of the way to go. So I think things planted in mass make more sense from a visual standpoint. So instead of saying like, I've got a bed of petunias, whatever, doesn't matter, wildflowers, and then like throwing a tomato or two in there, like just in the middle of the bed, it sticks out.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:11:34] Yeah.

Dr. Vikram Baliga [00:11:36] So what you could actually do instead is have dedicated areas in your landscape that work into the design. So, like, this is my wildflower patch, and then it sort of bleeds into an area where you have some tomatoes and peppers, which bleeds into something else. So I think when you group like five or six of those plants together, it's like, Oh, it's supposed to be that way, right? Like we're supposed to have a patch of vegetables and then a patch of wildflowers and then a patch of a garden or whatever else. Not that you can't sprinkle them in throughout the landscape, but the human eye kind of looks for groupings of things. And when you group things together, they sort of at the same time have a bigger impact that they sort of disappear. You don't see the individual tomato in a bed of something else. You have, oh, this is where the tomatoes go. And it makes sense. This is where the lettuce goes with maybe some sage or something behind it. So salvia behind it like, oh, it makes sense. Like people think the texture has ever.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:12:36] Got it, and that does make sense that that probably would look better than just a tomato or a random bell pepper over there with the cosmos, or whatever.

Dr. Vikram Baliga [00:12:47] Right.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:12:47] Sure. That's good. Also do you know, I love to have butterfly visitors and bird visitors to my garden. So what's your best piece of advice

for those of us who want to grow food and also, you know, want to provide for the wild things?

Dr. Vikram Baliga [00:13:09] Sure. You know, I don't think they're mutually exclusive. I think that even a lot of the edible plants that we think of in the landscape, maybe, maybe not even the more traditional ones like tomatoes and peppers, although those do provide good sources of foraging and things for wildlife. You think of plants like Echinacea or Calendula or different flowers that have maybe edible properties or, you know, different sort of maybe. I don't say medicinal. That's not the word I want, but different types of properties that we can use for products that are also like great pollinator plants. I tell you what, some of the best things you can do is look at herbs in the garden. So things like basil and thyme and rosemary. But we still get the sort of culinary aspect of it. But pollinators love those flowers. We are basil. Bees constantly come to bees.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:14:07] A lot of the herbs, the caterpillars just go crazy for them. And I like sharing, so I'm okay with that.

Dr. Vikram Baliga [00:14:16] Yeah. Yeah, I think you know, I encourage people to be diverse in the way that they think of their landscapes. And we sort of regionally tend to fall into some ruts in terms of like what plants with what plant materials are used and in which way they're used. You know, you drive around the city and it's like, okay, I've got knock out or is this. What really blew me was sage and that's all that to the landscape and you see it over and over and over and people start to think that, Oh, this is all I could use. Well, the fact is, you know, Texas is such a diverse state. You know, just talking about Texas, that there's so many things we can use in so many different places. It's just kind of getting creative and I think largely just not being scared to sort of try stuff, you know, put things in that may or may not work. And if they don't, okay, you know, for next year.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:15:07] Are there any good examples of or like places where we could see some good, good examples of multipurpose landscapes in Texas, anywhere, anything you can think of?

Dr. Vikram Baliga [00:15:19] You know, that's a good question. And I think, unfortunately, they're a little bit few and far between. That's one thing we're trying to do up here or horticultural garden on campus is make some demonstrations of, okay, how do we use fruit trees, the landscape, how do we use herbs and different edibles, the landscape. So we have large parts of the garden that, you know, we in our planting beds or in our large raised beds even, we'll put in flowers, adorable grasses, but then also tomatoes and peppers and other things as well. I think I've seen some of this at like the San Antonio Botanical Garden, Zilker Gardens in Austin. I know the Dallas Arboretum and the Fort Worth Botanic Garden. We've done a little bit of that. So I think some of our larger sort of like botanical institutes and public gardens are starting to do it. I would love to see more of it, but I think that as the sort of idea gains popularity again, we'll start to see more and more of that.

Andrew Lowery [00:16:22] So I think you mentioned Urban Greenspaces as well. Somewhere in there. That's a big focus of yours, right?

Dr. Vikram Baliga [00:16:28] Yes. Yeah, it is.

Andrew Lowery [00:16:30] Could you tell us what kind of got you into that? What drew you into urban greenspaces?

Dr. Vikram Baliga [00:16:35] Sure. So I spent before I took this job at Texas Tech. So I've been here in this position about four years now. And before that, I spent four years as a county agent, also here in Lubbock with the extension service as a county horticulture agent. And a big part of my job was working with small acreage farmers. And a lot of these are like urban backyard farmers. And what we started to see through that is as they collaborated and as they work together, things like community gardens and school gardens started in some ways almost naturally just come out of that collaboration. It's like, okay, we've got our own sort of insular gardens that we all do and you know, go to Farmer's Market. But what if we talk to community about that? What if we talk? It's about that. And so just by way of that and working with some school garden groups around town, I've gotten very interested in not just community gardens but public and urban greenspace in general with how do pocket parks and community gardens and rights of way with more trees and sidewalks with more plantings like improve. City life, improve the quality of life and safety and health and fitness of a community. And there's so much data out there about the benefits of it. I think that all cities I might even say cities passed a certain size, really. All cities should have some of these kinds of projects. It's easy to think about the city park that is manicured. It has a pond and all of those kinds of things. But what about like the empty lot that nobody's doing anything with or the old derelict homes that are just going to be torn down that we could turn into public space for the communities to serve a lot of different purposes. So that's somewhere in the long term I want to focus on in my research time is how do we make these kind of public spaces better? How do we make them actually serve the communities in the way they're intended to?

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:18:41] That would be really valuable because we do have a lot of places in in a lot of Texas towns that I know where it's that, you know, there's an area that's just not being used anymore. And so it just sits there until somebody decides to either do something with it or it gets torn down, like you say. But it's not really serving a whole lot of purpose in that state, you know?

Dr. Vikram Baliga [00:19:05] Yeah. And so we're working on some projects. So our department actually sort of owns a community garden. It's a weird situation. There is a homeowner in a neighborhood about a mile and a half from campus that's real close that had a she owned a home and then she owns a double lot right next to it, a double city lot. It's about, oh, 12, 14,000 square feet. Like it's not a small space, but it's not enormous quarter acre. So and she had started a little community garden on it and it had been a collaboration with different groups around town, the neighborhood association, all of that. And she decided she's getting older. She decided she wanted to donate it to the university so that it wouldn't just get eventually sold. It turned into two small house. Right. And so being the garden guy, that's apparently my job, too. So I'm overseeing this community garden and I've got a grad student working on it right now, and it's a cool little space. We're trying to figure out long term what we want to do with it, but we're trying to balance production for that community of having like vegetables available with having a space where people can just kind of come hang out and eat lunch and things like that. So we're working on plans for that and it's, it's been a cool project. Uh, it's been challenging in a lot of ways because it's sort of a separate thing and like funding for those and getting volunteers for those and all of that is complicated. But, but we're, we're excited to see where it goes.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:20:44] Yeah. So you touched on something that I wanted to ask you about. If there are folks who are listening who say, Oh, I would love to do something like that, what does it take? Does it just take, you know, like a little army of like

a little army of volunteers to get started? Does it take a lot of money? How do you make something like that happen?

Dr. Vikram Baliga [00:21:08] Yeah. Great question. The answer is yes to both. To a certain extent. Right. Like, I think you can make up for some of the financial side of it by having enthusiastic people. It doesn't take a lot of money to start a garden. But, you know, you do have to potentially pay for power and water and supplies and tools and all kinds of those things. It doesn't have to be expensive, but like there has to come from somewhere, right? Whether that is donated by community organizations or businesses, I know a lot of our stuff came from ether, like Home Depot and Lowe's. They donated quite a bit of stuff.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:21:48] Well, that's nice.

Dr. Vikram Baliga [00:21:49] Not necessarily money, but like in-kind, like wood for raised beds and material, things like that, you know? But the bigger thing is having people that are willing to go do the work. A lot of these projects, unfortunately, start off. Like real strong. And then people move. People get different jobs. People's lives change. And it often ends up like one or two people get saddled with all of the work.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:22:18] Yeah.

Dr. Vikram Baliga [00:22:18] And so the biggest challenges is how do we make something sustainable in terms of not just the, like, ecological side of it or monetary side of it. Just not the manpower. And that's a question I wish I had a better answer to, because we're figuring that out as well. But what we hope to do long term is sort of build a playbook for urban greenspace. And, okay, here are things that have worked for us. Here are things based on data and experience from other places may work across the board. Here's signage designed. Here are logistics and have that be a thing that's available for people in different communities wanting to start projects. That's a long term goal.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:23:04] Oh, I think that would be great because humans are really good at starting stuff and we're less good at sticking with it. I'm thinking about my own craft room at home. For one thing, just keeping that momentum going and making sure, like you say, that it doesn't fall to one or two people over time. That would be great to have some instructions like that, I think for sure. Super helpful. So we mentioned before that you're podcaster. I want you to tell. And I didn't even realize that you had a second one play. Planthropology, I think is widely popular. But for folks who aren't familiar with it, give us give us the pitch. And why do we need Planthropology in our lives?

Dr. Vikram Baliga [00:23:48] So I started Planthropology in 2019 because I was trying to finish my dissertation and I didn't want to. So I was, you know, grasping it. Here are other things I could do with my life, which I think a lot of academics out there probably relate to.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:24:06] Yeah. Yeah.

Dr. Vikram Baliga [00:24:09] You know, either your house gets real clean or you start a podcast.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:24:12] Or something like that. Yeah.

Dr. Vikram Baliga [00:24:16] So the basic idea is that I talk to plant people about, not the subject matter as much, but about why they care about the environment and care about

what they do. The name sort of came from a conversation I had with a friend about the like, anthropological past connection we have to the environment, right? You know, we as a species have this like deep rooted connection to plants and nature that we're trying hard to forget over the past few decades. And in some ways and I'm really interested in why people keep being plant people, why they keep doing what they do. Like ten years into their career, 20 years into their career. And so the basic ideas that I interview, people working in the industry, students, professors, anyone who will talk to me that are even tangentially related to plants about why like how did they get into it? Why do they still do it? It's very casual frequently that and then I've over the past years done some like solo content where I just do episodes about stuff that I think is interesting. Yeah, because at some point I was like, It's my podcast.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:25:30] And I have to say, the combination of plant and anthropology into one word is genius. Yeah, I love that name.

Andrew Lowery [00:25:40] So brilliant.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:25:41] Yes, it is.

Dr. Vikram Baliga [00:25:42] Well, I appreciate it.

Andrew Lowery [00:25:43] So speaking of podcasting, you know, a lot of people want to start podcast or are starting podcast are or are already in the midst of a podcast. Sure. What advice would you give to, you know, people who are who are sitting there thinking about putting something down on paper and recording it and going through the process? What advice would you give to a new podcaster?

Dr. Vikram Baliga [00:26:05] So I think. Yeah, that's a good question. I've been thinking about that. And I think the biggest thing is. Having a clear like y in mind because you can pick up the technical skills you can get on YouTube and, you know, learn the basics of recording and audio editing in a couple of hours. And you don't have to have any like, you know, you can you can record it on your cell phone. There's podcasts out there that are getting, you know, thousands of downloads an episode. Essentially, it sounds like they're recording on an open mike on their cell phone so that, you know, over a table right now, I find some of those unlistenable personally, but I'm also sort of an audio snob in a lot of ways. So. But more important than the technical side of it or the. You know, I have to get this many followers. Blah, blah, blah. All that's all. That's noise. In addition to a good value proposition, right? Like, why should people care? Why are you talking about your topic? So my biggest advice for a podcaster is not like, don't just start one to start one. But some people have gotten bored and have done it. You know, the average life of any podcast across the board is like seven episodes.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:27:26] Really?

Dr. Vikram Baliga [00:27:27] Yeah. And then they're gone.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:27:30] Wow. We're killing it, Andrew.

Dr. Vikram Baliga [00:27:32] Yeah. No, but I really like podcasts that make it past. Episode 15 are honestly pretty rare through the data. There are currently 4.2 million podcasts on the planet. The average number of episodes is like six.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:27:48] Wow.

Dr. Vikram Baliga [00:27:49] So that should tell you something, right? Like if you don't have a clear picture of why you're doing it, if you're not talking about something that you actually care about, like one, your listeners are going to sniff that out pretty quick. Sure. And if you're not passionate about it, there's no reason for them to be passionate about it and to like you'll know it's time consuming. Yeah, like, I have taken a very long break. I was like, I'm going to take the summer off and now it's November. But I should report them because it's time consuming. You've got to do research, you've got to edit, you've got to record. And especially if you're on a podcast has yes, you've got to coordinate them. There's all this that goes into it and if you don't care what, yeah, it's easy to do for three or four episodes and I gather things to do with my time.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:28:38] Yeah.

Dr. Vikram Baliga [00:28:40] I think the other piece of advice would be to like the pragmatic about what success looks like in the podcast space. Because we have examples like Twitter and Tik Tok and Instagram and all this where. It's easy to kind of go viral and get a million likes on something. I think that's but like, you know, thousands of likes and hundreds of interactions and all these things like that happens on social media a lot. And podcasting is not that way. We have examples of, you know, I'm not going to say anyone's name, but big podcasters that got bought by Spotify that maybe getting like five or 6 million downloads an episode.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:29:22] Mm hmm.

Dr. Vikram Baliga [00:29:24] That is by far the exception to the rule. Like the average podcast in its first week of life gets. 80 downloads, something like that. That's the median podcast. And so, like, I think people need a clear picture of, okay, if I'm reaching even 50 really interested people like that success. But people that listen every week that are excited about what you have to say the. Sort of overall take for me is that like my numbers matter to me because I'm a data nerd and I like seeing that kind of stuff. But if I have like 50 people that are like listening to the words I say every week, that's kind of huge, right? That they care enough to add that to their day. Like, I think the context for what we do and how we do it is really important.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:30:18] These are all really good points. I mean, you've got to be passionate about something before you can invest this kind of time and energy into it. And then like you say, Yeah, just be realistic about the numbers because you're not going to blow up overnight like a celebrity would.

Dr. Vikram Baliga [00:30:34] Yeah, it's different. It's a whole different vibe.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:30:36] It is.

Andrew Lowery [00:30:37] It is. And the point you made that if you're not interested in what you're saying, then other people aren't really interested in what you're saying. I think that's golden. I think that's worth its weight in gold right there.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:30:49] You've mentioned that you've done lots of media things. I want to talk about that. I want to ask you about something that you do on Tik Tok. And I think Twitter. I'm not on Twitter or whatever, but this is the funniest thing. And I want

people to look this up because it's just so much fun. These are these seed growing hacks, I think is how they're selling themselves. What is going on with that? And tell us how you got so interested in these little videos. I think people are sending them to you now, right?

Dr. Vikram Baliga [00:31:19] Oh, that's like, yeah, my inbox is constantly full of just like the stupidest crap that I've ever seen of. Just like people like. So a lot of it comes out of some of these, like they're essentially content farms online. Like they're these companies that just generate just outrageous engagement bait. Right? It's like I'm going to I most of them have bananas. I don't know why, I'm going to stick my rose cutting in a potato or a banana. Yeah. Plant it. And then, like, put eggs in there. It's weird. Right. And it's it is purposefully. Most of it is purposefully outrageous. Right. Because it it generates engagement.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:32:06] Okay.

Dr. Vikram Baliga [00:32:07] Well, it works, apparently, because, like, I just get some of the I watch some of the stuff and I'm like, are you like really? Really. And the problem is that some people believe that these things work. Uh huh. And so, like, I give people. No, no, I really heard that if you put, like, you know, honey on your rose cutting or your rose that you got from the store and you put it in like it'll grow. Yeah. No, no.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:32:31] No, no.

Dr. Vikram Baliga [00:32:32] Or if I, you know, throw my I don't know, it's all kinds of stuff. And so, like, one day I was just bored and I'm like, I'm going to make a reaction video to this. And it turns out that people think that's funny. And so in my little lizard brain, I'm like, Oh, I must do more. You know, people, like, must do more. Yeah. And so I get I get them nonstop and it's really just for giggles. But at the end of the day, some of these hacks are like. They're just believable.

Dr. Vikram Baliga [00:33:08] Yeah, yeah. And they do. And then their house is full of gnats or whatever. And so it's good content for me, but it's also like I have thought, well, I've long thought and not and maybe this is why I fit well with extension for a while that like education should go where people are and it should approach people in the way that they are consuming education. If that makes sense, we should teach people where they are and in the ways that they're learning. And now people are on TikTok, people are on Instagram reels, and it's not just people doing silly dances, even though there's plenty of that, but people really go there to learn things and there's some great educational content on all these platforms. So my goal is to do that, but also to make people laugh and call out some of the bad content on there. Mm hmm. Just to give people context for. Okay, this is silly, but then what's the right way to do it? Right. What's the other half of that? What's the other side of that? So it is a friend of mine, a former colleague. Send it. Education is a long and repetitive process, and I think about that a lot as I make these videos that sometimes are kind of the same and they're goofy, like, okay, but I am maybe just a little link in this person's educational journey, learning more about plants and nature and the environment. So like, even though it's silly, like I kind of in a weird way do take it seriously, maybe more than I should. Some days I just get worked up. This is the dumbest thing I've ever seen. I'm going to yell about it on the Internet for a while.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:34:45] Oh, my gosh. Well, you know, it's funny that you say you have to teach the people where they're at, because a few months back, we talked to Ben Masters, the director of the Deep in the Heart film. And that's exactly what he said.

You know, I mean, like almost word for word. He said, you know, he didn't set out to become a videographer, but now he's into these feature motion pictures about wildlife because people will watch a movie if it's really well-made and it doesn't look like, you know, a video that you shot with your GoPro or whatever. But it was a really well-made thing. People will watch it so he can educate people that way. And I think that's a perfect point.

Dr. Vikram Baliga [00:35:32] But I think it takes it kind of takes all. Like, as educators, whether that is a formal educator or an informal educator, online science community, we're all sort of working together towards similar goals and maybe it doesn't get. I don't know portrayed that way, or we don't do it as well as we should. Largely because at the university level, we're not well incentivized for outreach. I think it's like you get promoted because your papers and your grants and you're teaching numbers and your evaluations and blah, blah, blah, blah. Right. Those things are fine, then they're good. But there is this big feedback loop where the people that are paying us to do the research. Are not getting the education right. The taxpayer that is funding all of that nonsense. We do. It's all nonsense. I'm being tongue in cheek. But like. But. But that funds our careers. Like, we take that information and we paywall it and we put it in a journal, and we write it in jargon that they can't understand. And we're now closing the feedback loop.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:36:43] Right? And that's when it does become nonsense, when we write it in that jargon, so that the average person who's just interested in, I don't know, raccoons or fire or deer or tortoises or whatever, wouldn't be able to understand it if they read it anyway.

Dr. Vikram Baliga [00:37:05] So, you know, if, if I'm looking at one of these seed germination videos, I could talk about it in terms of like the different metabolic processes and the gibberish like acid that does this X, Y, blah, blah. And that's fine, like for the classroom. Okay, I talk about those things, but in general, I'm like, No, don't put cinnamon on your seed and bury it in a potato. Don't do that. Stick it in some soil and it grows because that's what most people just need to know is like, practically speaking, how do I take this thing and how do I turn it into a tomato? Right. And like both sides of that are important. And we're not meeting in the middle for some reason.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:37:41] Yeah. But I think your videos are funny and I think people love them so much because you're just saying, or shouting as the case may be, the thoughts that are in our head. We're like, Yes, yes. And you're just saying those thoughts out loud. And that's what makes it so much fun. So if you're listening and you have not seen Vikram's Tweets about these things, you got to go look it up. It's gold. Now, we love to ask for a Biology Blunder of each one of our guests. Do you have a Biology Blunder that you could share with us today?

Dr. Vikram Baliga [00:38:16] Oh, goodness, sure I do. So research if for those of you who have not done grad school, especially biological research, never goes. I think the way we think it's going to go ever, like ever. And so my masters degree was in olive trees, like, so I studied all this and water conservation and South Texas olives.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:38:39] Okay.

Dr. Vikram Baliga [00:38:41] So we had I did a greenhouse study and a field study. So I had 80. Actually, it's I did my master's research in the greenhouse that are right now, which is kind of cool. Oh, that's neat. Yeah, it's kind of full circle, right. So we had 80

something all live olive trees in five gallon pots or, you know, three foot tall trees or whatever. Doing all kinds of data on them. And we were like, okay, how do we contextualize this? Because these trees are different sizes, they're different varieties. And it's like, Oh, let's get leaf area, let's take a leaf area. Turns out to get leaf area, you have to pull all the leaves off a tree if you want, like full leaf area ok trees. They don't love that for one thing, deciduous, especially like a semi evergreen, like an olive. You really don't it doesn't ever want to have all its leaves pulled off. So we pulled all the leaves off of 80 something trees, which even though they look small, that's a lot of leaves. And we're running them through this leaf area meter. And somewhere along the line we got a scale infestation on our trees and we still had to pull leaves off and they're covered in honey do and we're like slogging through scale insects on. There were a lot of different ways we probably could have done that. But it's like, you know, I don't know if this was in the proposal. This is how we decided we were going to do it. So this is how we're going to do it. So biology, I think, never really cares much about our opinions of how we should approach it. And it's as if, we're going to show up and trees are going to resist having all their leaves pulled off it right through a little machine. So that was one of them for sure.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:40:24] That's funny.

Dr. Vikram Baliga [00:40:26] You know, things sound like a good idea when you're writing the proposal.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:40:30] Oh, my gosh. Yeah. You get a new grad student and you go out with them to help them get started on their project. In about two days you're like, Oh my God, what idiot decided we would do it this way? And of course, I'm the idiot. You know? I'm the idiot who decided we were going to do it this way. Things sound great when you're in your office typing it up, trying to get that money.

Dr. Vikram Baliga [00:40:58] This would be great. It'll be great. Then it's like, Oh, this is not great, it's bad.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:41:03] So that is a funny one. You know, we have you and I, have a greenhouse connection when you talk about this greenhouse that you work in. When I was at Texas Tech, I was in the Department of Natural Resources Management for a few years, and I had a cactus project that lived there in that greenhouse that you're talking about. So we have like, I don't know, like a Kevin Bacon greenhouse degrees of freedom thing going. Yeah, we were we were studying fire on this little endangered cactus. It was already in production before it was declared endangered. So, don't like write me letters, folks. But, you could just go and buy this little cactus. And we were seeing if you burn it, does it die? Turns out it does.

Dr. Vikram Baliga [00:41:56] Yeah. It's funny because we do like drought studies and we do studies like that. Yeah. And what we don't necessarily tell people is like, Oh, no, we're going to kill all of this. Like the goal is not to see like, like what survives. It's almost like, what's it going to take to kill this thing with how much drought is it going to take to kill this thing, right? Yeah. We murder a lot of plants in the name of science.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:42:21] Yeah, we do. Yeah, those little cacti. I remember putting them back in the greenhouse, and they're these little crispy brown nuggets that look like a piece of coal. And then we start watering it like, Come on, Buddy, you can do it. But, No, they died. Well, is there anything else you'd like to talk about?

Dr. Vikram Baliga [00:42:44] You know, I don't know. Nothing too specific. I just think that this whole idea is really cool. I love what you're doing. And, you know, I think any way we can cast our nets wider and talk to more people about nature and science and conservation and all the things that kind of go into it. I am a big proponent of the idea that people don't care about things they don't really understand or like or that they're not familiar with. So the more people that hear about some of the even the little minuscule specific things we do in science, like, oh, that I care about this a little bit now because I know. All right. Right. Like, I love the project and I love. We all do. And I think it's great.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:43:26] Thank you. Thank you. We appreciate that. Like I said, even before we started, we were like, okay, you guys, you got to listen to this one called Planthropology. It's really fun, and it's cool, and it's interesting. So, yeah, we've been following you for a while.

Dr. Vikram Baliga [00:43:42] Oh, cool. Well, I appreciate that, too.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:43:45] Yeah. Okay. Well, everybody, for our listeners, you got to look at Planthropology podcast and, what's your other one? In the Grow?

Dr. Vikram Baliga [00:43:53] In the Grow.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:43:54] Yeah, yeah. Okay. That's pretty neat. Thank you so much for spending time with us. I enjoyed talking to you today.

Dr. Vikram Baliga [00:44:00] Yeah, thanks for having me.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:44:02] Have a great day. And remember, don't feed the wildlife. A Talk On the Wild Side is a production of the Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute of Texas A&M University-Kingsville. Funding for this project is provided by the Harvey Weil Sportsman Conservationist Award by the Rotary Club of Corpus Christi. Podcast artwork is created by the talented Gaby Olivas. Tre' Kendall contributes with his creative talents as well, and editing is conducted by Andrew Lowery.