

# **AFE Internship Final Report**

By Susanna Whelan

Over this past summer, from May to August 2011, I worked as an intern for Molbak's Home and Garden. I spent eight weeks at the company's plant farm and four weeks at the retail location. My time was divided up into two week intervals with each set of two weeks spent working in a different area of the farm. The 5 different areas in which I studied and worked were as follows: propagation, production, assembly, wholesale and retail. For the last 2 weeks of the internship I was allowed to choose the area in which I would like to work so I spent them in the retail store.

Every Friday I met with Mark Bradbury, the general manager of the plant farm, in order to discuss what I was learning and offer any suggestions I had towards improving the efficiency of the operation. Whilst in propagation I helped with the start of the year's poinsettia crop. I helped sterilize trays to receive the cuttings as well as set them up in the greenhouse. Later, I unwrapped the cuttings, dipped them in Rhizopon AA #2 (a rooting hormone) for them to be placed into foam in the trays. My other duties while working with the poinsettias was making sure they were well watered and cleaning them of dead leaves to prevent a botrytis infection.

On the production line I helped several other workers repotting plant from seed plug trays into larger pots so that they might grow into a proper retail size. I operated the soil machine that filled pots with growing media as well as actually sticking the plantlets. I worked on both the larger production line working with gallon size pots and the smaller line that did small 4 inch pots. Other jobs I rotated through were labeling and racking the full trays of filled pots. It was here on the production line that I was able to see how important efficiency is for greenhouse growers. I was also able to work on and improve my Spanish.

Every day the retail store would send an electronic order form to the farm requesting plants that they would need. The day before, an employee at the store is able to look at the farm's production tracking system and see what plants are available (meaning which are done growing and are of good quality). They then fill the order according to what the store would need to fill the shelves after a day of sales. In the morning at the farm price labels are printed for everything ordered and sorted according to where they plants are located in the greenhouse ranges and nursery. Workers go out and pick the requested number of plants of the best quality, price them and place them on racks at the loading dock. A dock checker ensures that the number of plants pulled and priced matches the order form. Large trucks bustle back and forth between the farm and the retail store delivering plants. I learned how to operate the price tag machine, pull plants according to the order and give them price tags. I also learned how to dock check the racks of plants all with the proper paperwork.

Once at the retail store, plants are dock checked again and the racks are rolled into the holding area, which is located at the back of the retail stores in an employee only section. Retail associates working the sales floor keep an eye out not only for customers who need help, but for holes in the displays as well. They can then go to the holding area and bring out more product as needed. This was one of my duties while at the store. It is fast paced in the retail store. I learned how to think on my feet to help customers and to always keep the displays looking nice.

In wholesale, it is slower and more production oriented. While you do have to make yourself available to help wholesale customers (landscaper, contractors, and container gardeners) and keep

display areas neat and well stocked, there are a wider range of duties focused on keeping the plants healthy and to keep things growing properly. Since much more of the product is perennial trees and shrubs, one has to ensure that if they don't sell they still look nice for the following year. There's much more trimming back, watering, spacing and shifting of plants than in the retail store. While in wholesale I learned the importance of choosing plants to grow that your customers will want to sell to their customers. The organization of a wholesale nursery should be just as important as a retail store (in order to make things easier for customers) with all the utility of a farm. It was here that I learned to drive a tractor pulling trailers which I enjoyed immensely. I also learned management skills concerning how best to utilize your employees and the space available in the nursery.

In conclusion, there was much to learn on my internship this past summer. I learned a great deal about how all the small moving parts of a plant farm and retail operation fit together to form a successful business. It was very rewarding for me to have this experience and I recommend it thoroughly to other students interested in greenhouse and nursery production.

