Charles McKenzie, a junior at The University of Georgia, had the honor of being selected as a Vic and Margaret Ball Internship recipient Fall of 2012. After a short deliberation, Charles, or Charlie as most know him, decided to request to work at Tagawa Greenhouse Enterprises, Inc. For the very few that may not have visited Tagawa's Brighton facility, it is a very well run bedding plant production facility, that also turns out some awesome containers and some of the prettiest basket combinations I have ever seen. The Tagawa family runs several production facilities in the US including a major garden center. Across all production areas that I visited, the best description would be to say, they care about what they grow, and care about their employees. Charlie's internship began in January 2012 and ended late June of 2012. Bill Kluth, the internship program supervisor who also serves as one of the owners at Tagawa worked with Charlie to make his relocation to Brighton an easy one. From the first week in January, I received a steady stream of emails detailing what Charlie was doing, and how Tagawa was giving him opportunities. The company apparently asked him to start a few days early to help out with a weather related crop issue that demanded extra labor right then and there. Charlie accepted and was immediately immersed in the Tagawa work ethic. He was impressed, and shared a few long emails about the team attitude at Tagawa’s. From that point on, it was email after email detailing the many, many things Tagawa was "letting" him try his hand at. By this time, he had met the other interns at Tagawa’s, and had
been through orientation. Soon Charlie was contacting me about several special projects that Bill Kluth had asked him to consider. I spent time discussing these with Charlie, and could tell he was excited about the work. Over the next few months, Charlie worked on and finished three projects, including a marketing survey for Tagawa’s. In May of 2012, I have the opportunity to travel to the Brighton Facility to visit Charlie, and to participate in a group tour hosted by Tagawa for members of the board of The American Floral Endowment. Dr. Terry Ferris also joined us as she had two interns at the facility. The day was spent listening to an overview of the company, and then led into a great tour of the facility. At that facility tour I learned that Tagawa’s was using lean flow principles in their shipping department that had yielded significant savings. The simplicity and organization of the shipping process was an education to say the least. My student was very impressed and influenced by his exposure to the lean-flow principles, and has signed up for my Horticulture Business Practices class next semester because of what he learned here.

The tour then went through several seedling production houses where immaculate plugs were being grown. The cleanliness and organization of the interior greenhouse facilities was equally impressive. The tour guide stressed how Tagawa strives for uniformity and how they have many assessment points in place to verify the plugs are on track. We toured the storage facilities and shipping dock, and then headed to the finished plant material houses.

The bedding plant flats were just coming into bloom, probably turn 2 or 3 by that time of year, and were magnificent. Uniform blooms and well orchestrated employees sending them to the shipping docks. We discussed how Tagawa coordinates with their garden
center enterprise and how they manage inventory assessment. Our next stop was the houses that they grow hanging baskets in. This was my favorite point in the tour. The baskets, seen here below, were gorgeous. The color combinations were perfectly balanced, on the bright side of pastel, and had a wistful nature due to very insightful plant selection. I did not meet the grower that made those decisions, but I can tell you that person deserves a pay raise. They were impressive! They were also completely sold out! The uniformity between baskets was something I wish my students in Georgia had seen firsthand, although I took lots of images, because you won’t see this very often.

We then went into an area where larger containers were being grown. Same wonderful color combinations, same effect! Very eye catching. Charlie told me they put a lot of work into those containers, and it showed. Charlie explained to me he had several supervisors at Tagawa go above and beyond in training him, including a fellow named Rodrigo who apparently adopted him into the league of growers within a week or two. Charlie told me he “learned a ton from that guy” over the next several weeks.

I was impressed that Charlie was able to name as many plants as he did. He had not yet taken out ID courses, and apparently picked up the plant ID quickly. He also was able to speak Spanish and interact with the Hispanic growers and employees there well. I was particularly happy to see him making jokes and interacting with many employees on a personal level. He really had been immersed in the company!

Charlie sent me emails about being sent to New Mexico. I have not been to the Tagawa facility in New Mexico, but from what Charlie told me, it is impressive. It is a twenty acre plus glass greenhouse that they grow bedding plants out of. Charlie was given an opportunity to learn how to spray chemicals and run a large section of the greenhouse.
To say that he was thrilled would be an understatement. He learned pesticide application, insect life cycles, scouting with sticky cards and scheduling there. His emails from there were exciting to read. He was then transferred to the Golden Colorado facility to learn under another supervisor, and then back to Brighton to take on marketing and other business aspects under Bill Kluth.

Erik learned how to work in a team “field crew” situation, and became functional in Spanish. His last words to me on the visit were that he wanted to take Spanish when he returned to Georgia because he now knew how important it was to have that second language. He also discussed with me his observations on how Tagawa supervisors manage people. He was very taken by how loyal and focused the employees were. Charles figured out that having respected employees that wanted to work at a company was a very effective way to establish a management program.

The most fascinating aspect of the tour was how organized the massive shipping efforts were. On the tour we saw many crops being processed for shipping. Charlie is seen here with a cart-lain full of bedding plants tagged, counted, sorted and ready for a truck to take them on their way. The crew handled the crops carefully, and I saw little wasted effort.

The tour ended with the group reconvening, and a presentation of individual student projects ensued. I think Terry Ferris and I were most impressed with how Bill Kluth had inspired and motivated these students to do significant projects with enthusiasm. Having worked with students for 25 years, seeing the level of independent work done by our students was heart-warming! It was very obvious to me the students had grown as people, and gained experience not only in skills, but in interpersonal cooperation. Charlie is a different student. He is now focused, and goal oriented in his new plan of study. He speaks confidently about becoming a grower. This last week, he quite clearly stated that after graduation, which we have scheduled, he, Charlie McKenzie, hopes to work for Mr. Tagawa. Bravo!
Extra Curricular Activities!
As is my tradition, I spent an additional day on my own expense to tour Charlie around Colorado. I invited and Bill Kluth was gracious to let me bring the other interns with me to visit Steven Newman, the Extension Floriculturist at Colorado State University. Steve gave the four of us a wonderful tour of not only the CSU gardens, research station and classroom facilities at CSU, but also took us around to a few garden centers and an organic vegetable production facility. It was an awesome visit! We had a great lunch downtown Fort Collins and finished the day off at a deck party at Steve home hosted by Steve and his wife. Administrators and out of town horticulturists were also there, along with CSU students and graduate students. It was as close to a perfect day as one could get!

Visiting a grower’s mist house outside Fort Collins. Steve Newman was wonderful to our students!

Driving back from Fort Collins, I had a long conversation with the students about their career plans and how they might fit into various jobs and opportunities. The interns were not shy, and had very clear goals they had set. It was apparent that all the interns had been brought by their experience at Tagawa to that level of maturity where there is the beginnings of personal vision, the glimmer crafting of a way of life, and the way to achieve it had set in. It was one of the most enjoyable and positive conversations I have ever had with a group of students. I am grateful to the staff, employees and the owners at Tagawa Greenhouse Enterprises for the quality education and experience they gave our students.
In Summary:

Tagawa’s internship program is thorough, well managed, innovative in the way they assign and execute independent student projects and presentations, and unique in the intensity of individual contact and instruction the students receive. It was apparent to me and I’m sure to the visiting AFE Board members, that the program at Tagawa is very effective and an outstanding place to send our Vic and Margaret Ball recipients.

Respectfully Submitted

Paul A. Thomas  
Professor of Floriculture
Charlie McKenzie Intern Experience at Tagawa Greenhouse Enterprises

It didn't take much time after moving into the intern housing at Tagawa Greenhouse Enterprises in Brighton, CO before learning what was expected and what the company's culture was. Our intern coordinator, Bill Kluth, informed us that Tagawa's Golden, CO facilities had experienced severe wind damage to the polyethylene glazing and that many of the perlins and vital components to the superstructure needed to be replaced. On top of that, there were at least two ranges of spring season plugs that needed to be moved out of the damaged ranges to prevent any weather damage that could occur to the exposed plugs in the middle of Colorado winter. Bill had planned to take the other two interns, and myself on a tour of the Tagawa Colorado facilities, but instead asked us to help with the movement of the compromised plugs in Golden. We met a group of the operations employees at the Brighton facility at 5:45am to take a van to the Golden facility to start work on moving plugs. Over the next two days, a large number of employees facilitated in moving plugs from damaged houses to ensure quality plug production. Throughout the two days I learned many things on the fly, but most importantly I learned that every member of the company, including very key executives, worked together in times of need to better the company. In fact, the first day I met the Vice President of Production, John Williams, was in an interaction we had while stooped over in the middle of wire benches moving plugs. Immediately after seeing that the VP of Production and an owner of the company, had rolled up his sleeves and worked just as hard if not harder than the rest of the operations crew to move the plugs to a
suitable environment, I knew what commitment it took to be an employee of Tagawa and the quality of the company I would be learning from for the next six months. The first two days of the internship, although not planned, allowed myself to see what was expected and to strap my boots up a little tighter to prepare for the experience of a lifetime.

I had never been in a greenhouse facility like the Tagawa's have built. Massive is an understatement. It took four days of careful listening, my broken Spanglish and interaction with many employees just to figure out the layout of the Brighton facility. Although I was a new face around the facility, I was no stranger. Immediately the entire company took to assisting, teaching and helping in any way possible, despite any language barriers. After a few more days I learned that not
only myself and the other two interns received this treatment, everyone at the company did. It became very apparent that no question was stupid, no mistake was irreversible and that learning, always improving, and most importantly, always moving, engrained in every employee through the company culture. After spending time in the soils, seeds, tray filling, planting and operations departments, it was time to move into plug production. My time spent with a very experienced and talented plug grower named Rodrigo, was irreplaceable. Rodrigo taught me anything I needed and wanted to know, on top of letting me spread my wings and tend to a house of plugs on my own. He gave me the responsibility I yearned and allowed me to understand his techniques and how much of an art plug production is.
The next step of the internship included a trip to the Tagawa Southwest facility in Estancia, New Mexico. If Colorado was 1,400 miles different from Georgia, New Mexico might as well been 500,000 miles different. Upon arriving and touring the facility in New Mexico the first day of our two-week at the facility, my jaw dropped, and it stayed open for the next two weeks. I had never been to a place like New Mexico, let alone seen an all glass dutch style greenhouse facility. Just the sight of 20 acres of open fluid glass greenhouses made me giddy. I was like a kid in a candy store. Drew Guffey, the production manager at Tagawa Southwest, and former Vic and Margaret Ball intern, asked the three of us interns, “what do you want to learn and how can we make it happen?“ No one had ever asked this of me and of course I was puzzled, as I thought that Drew would just have us pull weeds, irrigate or set up drip lines. This was not the case. With little confidence that Drew would oblige, I said, “I want to spray chemicals!” I had thought I said something wrong because Drew’s face showed extreme shock. He said “You WANT to spray??” I then told him that I had never had any experience learning how to correctly apply plant growth regulators or spray pesticides, as I had only done drenches and used the boom for application of biological pest control during my time in plug production. Drew wasn’t mad. He was elated! What is better than an intern volunteering to suit up in a Tyvek suit and spray chemical? Drew became my mentor and taught me everything I needed to know about spraying. He didn’t just say “here is the chemical and your personal protective equipment, go for it” I shadowed him a few times and then he let me loose, while closely monitoring and giving me pointers along the way. By day two, he felt comfortable enough to allow me to go on my own
and even allowed me to walk the crop with him and help make decisions on what needed to be sprayed. Not only did I learn how to spray, I learned how to anticipate a spray by scouting crops and understanding the crop growth cycles. The time I spent with Drew gave me a new outlook on the internship. I was now fully aware that every member of the company was a mentor. I also learned, that in most cases, if I wanted to try something new or do something that deviated a tad from the schedule, in the interest of furthering my knowledge, it was not just okay, it was encouraged. This type of encouragement can be seen in the picture of myself on top of the Southwest greenhouse's roof. All I had to do was ask, then next thing I know I'm forty feet above ground standing on ridges and tempered glass looking down at a range full of geranium stock, with a tad bit of knee knock.
From the time I left New Mexico to the end of the internship, I asked as many questions as possible and tried to understand how each department of the company fit into the well-oiled machine that the Tagawa's had built. After spending five weeks in the Tagawa Foothills location in Golden, CO, growing finished bedding plants and working with the organic grower, Ian, I returned to the main Brighton facility to begin working with marketing, merchandising and then upper level management. I thought horticulture only included the act of growing plants, HA! There is just as much thought and hard work going into the programming of Tagawa's systems, into the marketing of new product lines, into merchandising in retail locations and into the planning of the years to come, as there is in the act of growing the plants.
This portion of the internship allowed interaction with very key members of the company. Before the internship I didn’t have the slightest clue of what it took to run a business like Tagawa Greenhouse Enterprises. Sure, I knew someone had to work on financials and quality assurance, but the scale to which Tagawa operates is absolutely mind-blowing. I was no longer deciding what PGR to put on the petunia at week three in the growth cycle, but more concerned about liability insurance, how to plan an entire season of crop movement and pinching, how to speculate a market’s demand, how to maintain consistent quality, and how to treat every employee like they are the most important piece of the company. I gained so much knowledge and insight in my time spent with key executives such as Gary Schoneman, the company’s CFO, John Williams, an owner and Vice President of Production, Bill Kluth, a man of many hats, including but not limited to Senior Business Manager and owner. I even had the opportunity to sit down with Randy Tagawa, Owner and CEO, to pick his brain, ask as many questions as I wanted and to gather insight from every experience he shared. He also gave me unmatched advice that will surely benefit me in every aspect of my future life and career. I have had many great learning experiences in my time at the University of Georgia, but to be able to sit down with industry leaders like the ones described above, far outweighs any experience I have had at the university. Gathering real-life, applicable knowledge from intelligent and very experienced industry leading professionals throughout Tagawa has left me with a better understanding of the horticulture industry than ever anticipated. Six months ago I was telling my family and peers I
was going to Colorado just to grow flowers, upon my return I was able to tell a completely different story. I can confidently say I went to Colorado and returned with the understanding of the importance of attention to detail, how to monitor, mitigate and maintain, how to improve on something that seems like it couldn’t get any better, how to understand your employees needs and how you can help them better work for themselves and the company. I learned what values and company culture means to success and how to operate a business with the utmost integrity. And most importantly I learned, how to be first in class.

Leaving the internship, I come back to the University with applicable knowledge that will only benefit my further studies. After completing my degree in May of 2013, I plan to find employment in the floriculture field. Specifically, I would
like to move west and grow in Colorado, if the opportunity presents itself. I no longer want to just work in the horticulture industry. I want to be fully immersed. As I write this final report I ask myself two questions. One: when can I get back in the greenhouse? And two: what in my life has changed after my six months in Colorado at Tagawa? The only fitting responses to those two questions are “as soon as possible, and everything”