Vic and Margaret Ball Internship

Student Report

By Brianna Dorrell

Smith Gardens

Aurora, Oregon

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Receiving the Vic and Margaret Ball internship has been one of the most important catalysts for understanding my passions and desires for the life ahead of me. I was invited to sign up for this internship program by my Colorado State University advisor and although I was hesitant at first, I knew it would be an important stepping stone to a career in horticulture. After I had qualified for the scholarship and found a promising greenhouse in the northwest, I tossed a few belongings and the cat into the car and we took off for Portland, Oregon.

My first tour of Smith Gardens was awe-inspiring and overwhelming. Don Spence, Production Manager at the Aurora site, showed me around the greenhouse facility on my first weekend and I started work the next Monday. There were so many ranges to keep track of- not to mention how many plants there were to care for! I was interested to learn how a company this large was able to organize crop scheduling, management, and shipping. The employees at Smith Gardens welcomed me kindly and answered every question I asked of them. They set me up with an office space complete with company email and invited me to management meetings so I could fully understand what was going on within Smith Gardens. Everyone was so nice and welcoming, it made my transition easier and increased my excitement for the job.

I started working with the plant maintenance and growing team, who are responsible for all things crop management. These employees are focused on growing the crops, managing plant nutrition, chemical applications, and pest and disease problems in the greenhouse. Also, they are responsible for moving, spacing, and pinching plants as they grow to accommodate increasing space requirements. I was able to experience chemical applications from start to finish- calculating amounts necessary to cover a certain area of plants, proper mixing and application techniques, and regulations regarding disposal and safety. I then was happy to help the growing team irrigate and walk through the
greenhouse with the growers evaluating crop growth and options for management. I valued my time that was spent walking the crops with the growers. The head grower looked at, touched, and then looked closer at plants to decide if their growth was on track or needed adjustments in environmental controls, irrigation, or growth regulators. The growers used a system of colored flags to denote various chemical rates, irrigation needs, pinching requirements, and many other tasks for the employees to complete the following day. Although I appreciated the time spent listening to the growers speak about what they could see in the crops, I spent a good amount of time irrigating and applying beneficial mites, fungi, and nematodes. Irrigating sounded like hard work at first-and it sure was! I was grateful for the experience, however, and I changed and became stronger because of it. I changed in the way I dressed and the way I felt satisfied after a long day of hard work. I stopped wearing my everyday jeans and tennis shoes and started wearing baggy, heavy-duty pants and brown steel-toed work boots. It was practical and I enjoyed letting go of some of my concern about my self-image. Some days I worked for 9 hours and came home muddy and exhausted—but these were the nights when I felt best about myself.

After several weeks of watching, monitoring, irrigating, and talking about plant growth I began working in production, or transplanting department. This group of employees is focused on planting new crops and laying them down in the greenhouses. Here, I learned the importance of being able to communicate in Spanish in the greenhouse industry. I worked on the transplant line next to all Hispanic workers for one week. There are several transplanting machines that bring soil inside to a hopper where it drops down into pots moving along a conveyer belt. Further down the belt, workers stick cuttings, plugs, or seeds into pots as well as attach hangers to baskets and add tags to identify species and care instructions. Technology helped the production department move quickly and achieve great numbers of planted product each day. These employees work very hard and I admired their positive attitudes—even when working in a cold warehouse during a snowstorm.
I moved through several other departments after this experience working on the transplanting line. I helped with verifying production counts for the day and with preparing tags and plans for the next day. I assisted with inventory counting and with general administrative duties. I was able to help out in many ways and experience many job duties that are all important to making a large greenhouse company successful. One of my greatest achievements was feeling respected and important when a virus outbreak affected the vegetative petunias we received. I was responsible for testing and isolating Tobacco Mosaic Virus infected material and communicating my results with my supervisors. My confidence as a horticulture professional increased after having experience with identifying symptomatic tissues and helping to prevent the spread of this disease in the facility.

The impact on my horticulture career for this internship experience is invaluable. I was able to gain much needed experience and network with many important professionals in the industry. After working at a production greenhouse, I feel that I do not want to pursue a career in floriculture production but do have a new found confidence about my horticulture abilities and knowledge. I know that because of this experience I will excel at whatever sector of the horticulture industry I decide to work for. Completing the Vic and Margaret Ball Internship was an eye opening and thrilling experience full of ups and downs. I am a more confident and professional individual after this experience. I would encourage any horticulture student to apply for this program- it might be scary leaving your home at first, but in uncomfortable situations we are able to find strength and confidence and passion within ourselves.
This is the bicycle I was given to ride around the facility at Smith Gardens. This photo was taken in a new house which features flood floor irrigation as well as hanging basket lines.
This photo was taken during my time spent as an irrigator. I was responsible for helping Abby, the asst. head grower to water and apply chemicals to pansy jump-ups.
I helped the growers with an experiment with Fascination, a growth regulator which helps elongate cells and lengthen stems. This photo shows the effects of applying 0 ppm (left), 1 ppm (center), and 3 ppm (right) Fascination sprays. I worked on a powerpoint presentation after the experiment to summarize the effects and possible useful aspects of applying this chemical at different growth stages.