Vic and Margaret Ball Internship: Sun Valley Group

Over the summer of 2014 I worked for six months as a full time employee at the Sun Valley Group greenhouse in Arcata, California. Sun Valley’s Arcata site is a large floral farm that primarily grows bulb crops like tulips, lilies, and irises. They have an array of Greenhouse types from polyethylene hoop houses to full glass houses. While working there I became very familiar with the job and its operations. Being there for six months was a great way to jump the gate with experience. It was educational to see the post-harvest operations of a greenhouse which isn’t really taught in a formal school setting. Not only will it solidify what you have learned in school it will influence what you want to learn and focus on in the future.

PickingTulips

Sun Valley’s attitude impressed me the entire time I was there. Co-workers were more than willing to teach and were enjoyable to be around. Monthly farm meetings made the large greenhouse feel like a whole instead of many moving parts. The growers and management were more than willing to let interns try all the jobs and tasks. They answered all my questions, taught me how to operate all the equipment, and even set up an experiment to test iris blooms for them. I can’t say enough about the number of jobs they let me preform. I felt by the time I left I could have worked anywhere on the farm. Lane Devries was amazing for letting me see how he ran such a large operation. Seeing his involvement with every facet of the farms operation was daunting and awe inspiring.
Sun Valley’s quotes of the day and morning stretches gave it a wonderfully unique flavor like nowhere I’ve ever worked. The town of Arcata is beautiful and great to ride bikes through. I would recommend anyone to work or intern there from my experience.

_Sleeving Iris_

During the internship I preformed many different tasks. I’ll describe the ones I learned the most doing and the ones I liked the most. Picking hydrangea taught me the most hands down. So much in fact, I wrote a guide on how to harvest it while working there. From that job I learned the farms inventory system, how to organize coolers, filling orders correctly and on time, sales, time management, people management, sleeving rooms, shipping, and I could name many more. I attribute this to working there for such a long time and being able to have some managerial control over its operation. Seeing how things are done is good but to actually control it with your own hands is enlightening. The second most educational job I preformed was wine making. It was eye opening because I had no prior knowledge and could ask multitudes of questions and see the entire process step by step. Picking and planting were by far the most physically difficult jobs in the greenhouses. If I learned anything from these jobs it was to be efficient in the way you moved. Wasted motion adds up quickly when repeated numerousy.

One of the best things I learned is how helpful it is to know everyone by name. This may be especial important at larger greenhouses because of the increased staff size. It’s completely worth your time to get to know someone’s name. Knowing the people you work with makes it more enjoyable, but also easier. Attention to detail is indispensable, don’t leave home without it. Paying attention can make the difference between backbreaking work and moving feathers. A skill that I learned and was firmly
reinforced at Sun Valley was not to be dainty. Taking a step back and accepting that mistakes happen and can be fixed takes time and experience. Learning from your mistakes is the most important skill I learned from Sun Valley. You shouldn’t be afraid to try new things and fail at them; eventually you’ll master it if you learn from mistakes.

After the internship I plan on returning to the University of Georgia to finish my bachelor’s degree in horticulture. Upon graduation I’ll be looking for work in the Green House industry. At the moment long term plans are a bit open, but I would like to work for a smaller green house to get a comparison and make a better informed decision before investing into something more permanent. I would also like to try woody ornamentals and possibly propagation. I have many interests in horticulture that I would like to pursue, and plan on trying all of them in the near future. While the internship was very educational it was also very humbling. I feel much more at home in a greenhouse than ever before. I can’t wait to see what the future has in store.
I'd like to sincerely thank the American Floral Endowment, the Ball family, Sun Valley, and the University of Georgia for the internship opportunity. It was a pronounced experience.

-Eric J. Stallknecht