Metrolina Greenhouses
Rachel Palmer

Metrolina Greenhouses, located just outside Charlotte, North Carolina, is the largest single-site greenhouse in the country with over 150 acres of enclosed growing space. This past summer, I joined more than 600 other employees in the bustling, factory-like atmosphere to ensure the proper upbringing and delivery of tens of thousands of plants.

Under the job title of “assistant grower,” I had many responsibilities. Each day, the first priority was to ensure that the plants were watered properly. Every assistant was to keep an eye on his or her assigned section throughout the day and water as needed. After watering, the second priority tasks included applying any chemicals that were necessary on any given day. During my time at Metrolina, I learned how to properly handle, measure, and apply fungicides and plant growth regulators. Besides watering and chemicals, there were always ongoing projects that took last priority, such as fertilizing, pulling weeds, and removing dead plants from pots. Other activities that I performed weekly as an assistant grower included checking and replacing sticky cards each week, taking soil samples, and measuring plant heights. The findings from each of these activities helped us decide what needed to be done during the week to keep our plants on schedule.

Like anything in life, there were both positive and negative aspects to this experience, although the positive aspects far outweighed the negative. Admittedly, the work I did this summer didn’t teach me much about plants, but rather affirmed what I had already learned. It did, however, make me realize that the hours I spend studying that can at times feel entirely wasted have not been for nothing. It boosted my confidence level in my ability to work effectively in a greenhouse and offer benefit as an employee. Another great thing about this experience is what it taught me about the work environment. I had never worked in a greenhouse before this summer, so this was a real eye-opener. I learned that there is much more involved in raising high-quality plants than anybody could ever imagine. It isn’t as simple as putting a seed in dirt and watering it until it turns into a plant that’s pretty enough to sell. There are schedules to follow, guidelines to meet, and many problems along the way that threaten your ability to do the job right. The work isn’t
glamorous, either, and there were very few days when I didn’t leave the greenhouse drenched in sweat and covered in soil. Regardless, it is a rewarding experience to see all your hard work summed up by the simple yet beautiful sight of that very first flower peaking up at you from a sea of green.

The main negative aspect of my experience was that it was very hard for me to stay motivated in the position I held. I often found myself doing the grunt work that anyone off the street could easily perform. This made my days long, but I understand that it is all a necessary part of the job. Also, I found the days where there was little work to do hard to get through. This taught me that I am highly motivated by achievement rather than time. There were many days that I worked much more slowly than I could have simply because I knew that I would be there the full day regardless of when I finished what needed to be done.

Overall, my experience at Metrolina Greenhouses was one of the most valuable in my life so far. There is something to be said about hands-on training in that it teaches you so much more than you can learn in a classroom in a much shorter time. Although I am not quite decided on my career path or where the future will lead me, I know that what I learned over the summer will help me no matter where I end up.
Mums, about a week after transplant.

One of the cranes, used for moving tables around the greenhouse.
Mums about a month before shipping.

The last crop of zinnias.
Hanging baskets in the echoes.