From June through December of 2012 I interned at Bell Nursery USA in Burtonsville, Maryland. Bell Nursery is an interesting take on greenhouse growing. Their unique partnership with the Mid-Atlantic Home Depot market has helped build the next model for successful big box store nurseries. Bell not only focuses on growing great quality flowers, but actually do it. Through continuous care from greenhouse through retail at The Home Depot, Bell ensures quality to the end consumer.

During my time at Bell I worked under several fantastic individuals, however I felt that these individuals stood out and really went above and beyond to ensure that my time at Bell Nursery was valuable and interesting.

**Tom Wheeler**, Director of Growing Operations, helped me to hit the ground running at Bell; Tom constructed the itinerary I followed while exploring the upper-management of Bell. His knowledge and experience was welcomed and appreciated.

**Kevin Harris**, Head Grower Burtonsville, was my direct supervisor. His continuous guidance and support along with his mastery of new growing techniques from the Virginia Tech graduate program made the internship interesting and enriching.
**Rafael Arroyo**, Assistant Grower Burtonsville, also worked closely with me. His over 20 years of experience from the ground up at Bell was staggering and astonishing. I am fairly certain he has forgotten more about plants than I will ever know.

**Kevin Titherington**, Distribution Manager, guided me every step through the Bell Distribution Center in Elkridge, Maryland. He started with Bell Nursery in 1991 and is needless to say a wealth of knowledge about the inner workings of Bell.

Here are a few photos of one half of the Bell Location in Burtonsville. These are the new 3727 houses where all the poinsettias grown for the Mid-Atlantic Home Depot stores started. This is where I spent most of my time while interning at Bell.

This photo was taken from the upper mum fields looking down at the 3727 houses. You can see the 13” mums and combo pots with grass about a 1 ½ weeks before shipping.
This photo was taken from the ramp of 3727 back out towards the upper field you can see how Bell utilizes all their space including outdoor pavement. Here are some 6” pansies and hanging baskets.

This photo was taken inside 3727 when Dr. Barrett visited Bell. (left to right: Me, Dr. Barrett, Kevin Harris, ECKE Ranch Rep, Tom Wheeler, Rafael Arroyo)
Bell has also started an Idea House/Gardens on property displaying their products in an in-ground format so that Bell and Home Depot marketers can discuss and see a final product image. This is new and still in construction for its larger debut Spring 2013.

Work Performed:

While at Bell I was mostly tasked with assisting in the growing of the Poinsettia crop. Tom was excited having me at Bell for my existing knowledge of poinsettias that I had acquired while working with Dr. Barrett as the head student grower of poinsettias at the University of Florida, where we host the largest Poinsettias Show and Sale in the US. Kevin Harris worked shortly with poinsettias while studying at Virginia Tech, but was not well versed in the different varieties and their specific growing habits. I was asked to take soil and tissue samples, EC and pH readings, and the normal watering, spacing and pest management. I thoroughly enjoyed assisting Kevin and Rafael with the poinsettias and sharing the conversations where we all bounced our different ideas/thoughts off one another; it was quite enriching.

Here is a panoramic photo of all 25 of the varieties grown at Bell arranged in order of their response period lengths, lowest to highest.

I took this picture when I was asked to get pictures of all the 10” varieties with their response week. Bell uses these images to compare varieties and decide on next year’s variety selections.

My personal favorite poinsettia is the Ice Punch Variety. It has been the consumer favorite in the variety
trials at UF since its release 6 years ago. Here is a photo of this spectacular poinsettia. Here is a time progression to show the growth of the Early Orion Red poinsettias over time from first coloring to finishing. This was the earliest variety shipped for early sales and Black Friday.

Here is a picture of Patricio the section growers responsible for the Early Orion Red poinsettias. He is proudly displaying a nice specimen.

Bell not only grew 10” varieties of poinsettias, but also 6” for a drop in design with under growth, 7” for their sister interior/landscaping firm Premier Plantscapes, and poinsettia trees which were very impressive.

The drop-in 6” poinsettias ready to ship.

Some of the over 2000 Poinsettia
I also spent a week driving for Bell; I drove a box truck, similar to one shown at the beginning of the location section, to the eastern shore to retrieve mums from one of the Bell farms and returned them to the DC in Elkridge. Here is a photo of staged pansies and mums ready to be loaded on a truck. These carts are similar to those I retrieved for the Distribution Center. (You can also catch a glimpse of the new Bell mascot Cali, Kevin Harris’ dog, on the far left)

Before the poinsettias were of size for my knowledge to be beneficial I helped consolidate the remnants of the late spring crops (impatiens, calibrachoa, sweet potato vine, Zinnia, marigolds, geraniums, combo baskets, etc.) staging them for the last few shipments. Here’s a picture after a day’s work.
As my internship neared its end and most of the poinsettias were gone they began having me do clerical work. Filing chemical applications (photo following) and recording their grower card information. Bell uses a very convenient and useful tool while growing. At the end of every bench there is a grower’s card which list out everything that happened to those plants including: EC and pH recordings, fertilizer applications, PGR applications, pesticide applications and even watering.

Skills Learned:

I gained several new skills while at Bell, the most interesting was a new way to check EC and pH in the plants. While at UF I learned how to record pH and EC using the poor-through method requiring a set amount of distilled, deionized water, all soils to be saturated, and collection chambers. In the saturated-paste method where soil is collected from several different plants of the same variety then infused with water to make a paste in which you insert the meter directly you can find the information much faster. True, this method is not as accurate as the poor-through method, but in a grower situation where you are not required to be highly accurate, a general idea is all you need, the saturated-paste method is the best answer.
Another skill I learned, which was a little unconventional, was Rafa’s smell method. When doing a plant walk-through we, Kevin, Rafa, and myself, inspected the plants for noticeable disease, pest, deficiencies, toxicity, etc. One day we were walking through and Rafa pulled a plant out of the pot to inspect the roots and he smelled the soil. He said if the soil smells good then it is fine, most fungal or bacterial issues emit a poor order, therefore if the soil smells good then most-likely the soil is clean.

I also learned a new movement system in the new greenhouses at 3727. They had a lift/roller system in which individual table could be moved throughout the entire facility. There were also automated watering systems above the tables where hanging baskets could be grown. They would circulate above and trip a water trigger which would activate two spouts to water both upper and lower hanging basket lines. As this was new to me I found very efficient and interesting.

**Impact:**

I feel this internship mostly impacted my communication skills. It made me realize that if something is not going the way you think it should in the work environment, you only need to speak up. The worst that can happen is you will be right where you are currently. Luckily for me that is not what happened. I now see how important open communication through your supervisor and your employer can really make a job much more fulfilling.

*Please continue to see additional photos taken at the internship displaying several shots of the different poinsettia varieties, enjoy the color…*