

Vic and Margaret Ball Internship: A Journey Down Tagawa Lane

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The main office at Tagawa North, in Brighton, CO

In October of 2012, I was selected to be an intern with Tagawa Greenhouses during the 2013 spring season, and I was ecstatic! I had learned a little bit about their intern program from one of the owners, John Williams, when he came and spoke to my greenhouse crop production class at ISU, but I never would have imagined how amazing the coming journey would really be. I left Iowa early one brisk, January morning, and made it to the greenhouse in Brighton, Colorado later that evening. Right away, I could tell that I was going to have a great experience. Bill Kluth, one of the company owners, and my direct supervisor, greeted me with a smile and a handshake, and he introduced me to the other intern, Sander Hamer, a business student from the Netherlands. We went out for dinner, along with one of the Tagawa production managers, and former Tagawa intern, Tha Cha, and they gave us the rundown and told us a little bit more about what we should expect in the coming months.

My internship started off with a lot of introductions, orientations, and tests on various topics. Tagawa is a very safety-oriented company, so I spent a fair amount of time talking with their safety coordinator before I was even permitted to enter the greenhouses. Bill teased me, saying they had to make sure I knew not to drink water from the hose, or use empty pesticide containers as water bottles. Once I was finished with orientation, and had my bearings, I began the “Tour de Greenhouse.”

I started in the soil department, working the soil line, bagging substrate, and palletizing the bags we filled for later use. The following day, I worked on an Elle Pot machine, learning the ins and outs of operating an Ellegaard, and how to manage the delicate soil moisture balance going into the little liner plugs without jamming the machine. Next, I spent a day working on the flat-filling line, preparing the tens of thousands of plug trays that would be sown in the coming days. By the end of the first week, I had a really good overall picture of how Tagawa manages their various soils, and how they optimize each mix to perform the best for its intended use.

There was a week of lag-time after finishing up soils, and Tagawa sent the other intern and myself to the Pro Green Trade Show, in Denver. We spent three of the four days helping out at the Ball Horticultural booth, and attending seminars on a wide variety of horticulture-related topics. Bill took us around for short meet-and-greet sessions with owners of different successful greenhouses from all over Colorado, as well as some people from the Colorado Nursery and Greenhouse Association. As the tradeshow came to an end, I had an interesting snapshot of the history of the greenhouse industry in Colorado, and a much better understanding of how greenhouses in Colorado have grown to what they are today. It was really quite fun talking to all of these different people and seeing how they have all worked together over the years to survive and flourish. On the last day of trade show, Bill assigned me a topic for my intern project, which I would present to the company later in June, near the conclusion of my internship.

After Pro Green, it was back to the greenhouse with me! I spent a few days working in the seeding department, sowing all of the trays that I have helped fill the week before, and learning the Tagawa seeding process from the ground up. I spent the rest of the week working in the Tagawa operations department, performing tasks like plug patching, and working on the movement crew. After that, I spent a few days working with the production manager at their Brighton facility, discussing how they manage their fertilizer, chemical, and insect-monitoring programs. As January came to an end, I had a much better understanding of how Tagawa has grown to be the largest young-plant producer in the nation, and was prepared for the next step in my internship. At the end of January, I began commuting across town to one of the Tagawa plug ranges in Golden, CO, where I spent the next seven weeks working with the production manager and one of their top growers, finding out what it really means to be a plug grower in Colorado.



Shore flies EVERYWHERE as I'm spot-watering Pentas.

As I began the plug-growing portion of my internship, a realization hit me over the head like a large, blunt object. Bill Kluth had refined the intern program over the years to create a logical, linear path through the company for the intern to follow, but I hadn't reached the moment of truth where everything made sense until I started growing plugs. This was certainly not the last time in my internship that I experienced one of those, "AHA!" moments, but I quickly found myself following Tagawa protocol on everything from moisture management, to chemical applications, to environment monitoring, all without even thinking about it. The training and information I received earlier in my internship fell neatly into place as I started

growing plugs, and it felt very natural. Over the next few weeks, Vern de Groot, the grower with whom I was working, taught me a lot about what it takes to produce a high quality plug in the harsh, dry Colorado environment. It took me several weeks just to get good moisture management down, but I got it eventually. I spent my weeks at the Foothills facility irrigating, fertigating, spraying, mixing fertilizer, doing insect counts, helping with plug movement, repairs, and anything else that need my immediate attention. I finished my plug-growing stint after the third week in March, and continued on with the program.

After working in Golden for seven weeks, the other intern and I were sent down to work at Tagawa Southwest (TSW), their facility in Estancia, NM, for two weeks. I spent the first three days working with the production manager, Drew Guffey, another



A shot of me under the TSW front gate sign after planting the raised beds.

former Tagawa intern, and Vic and Margaret Ball scholarship recipient. It was nice to get a chance to work with a young person in a position that carries a great deal of responsibility. He really helped me gain some perspective on what the new generation of horticulturists are getting into once they finish school, and the kinds of challenges that we young people will face in our rapidly-approaching professional lives. The rest of my time at TSW was analogous to an extremely shortened version of my entire internship at the greenhouse in Colorado, up to that point in time. The last week and a half at TSW was divided equally between working in operations, inventory, maintenance, and distribution. When I was working with maintenance, they got me up on the roof and had me help the guys apply shading compound. I wasn't too comfortable walking around on panes of glass at first, but the tempered

glass roof was more than sturdy enough to hold me, and I got used to it by the time we were finished. It was pretty cool!

Upon returning to Colorado, I started a four-week long regimen of management meetings. Each day I met with someone different, and they explained and demonstrated all of their various responsibilities to me, and how their department helped complete the great jigsaw puzzle of the company. I visited with owners, managers, and supervisors alike, and really



Up on the roof at TSW. MAN that was a weird sensation!

learned how the company operates as a unit. I did not grow up in the greenhouse business, like many horticulture students my age, so I had never really seen how a greenhouse business functions as a whole. By the time I had visited with all of the site managers, production managers, distribution department, receiving, inventory, quality control, marketing, research and development, accounting, and human resources, I had a whole new picture of how a successful greenhouse business functions internally. Working with the different department managers also really drove home the importance of good communication within a company. And although many of the things I learned and experienced in this portion of my internship weren't foreign concepts to me, they were not topics that I had learned much about from my coursework at Iowa State. This part of my internship provided another one of those moments of clarity, where all of the seemingly disassociated pieces fell into place, and the broad, blurry picture sharpened, and gained real definition. This was one of the most exciting parts of the internship for me, because

it answered many of the questions that were in the back of my mind since I started my education in horticulture.

During the management period, the other intern and I were sent to work at Tagawa Gardens, the retail garden center in Parker, CO, for two days. Although the garden center isn't a direct part of Tagawa Greenhouses Inc, it is owned and run by a member of the Tagawa family, and Bill Kluth felt that it was important for us to get a feel for the retail side of the business, as well as the wholesale side. Our time there shared a similar format with the rest of the internship, and we met with all of the different departments for about an hour or two each. We asked plenty of questions, and got a chance to see how a cutting-edge independent garden center stays successful in the modern market. I have worked in an independent garden center back in my hometown, so I really enjoyed getting a chance to see how they are constantly modifying their business model, and incorporating new things and ideas every day. It was a very short part of the internship, but I really enjoyed it, and am glad that I had the opportunity to see what independent garden centers in Colorado are like.



The aftermath of a hail storm while I was at a Home Depot in Castle Rock, CO

For ten days in May, I worked on the InColor merchandising crew, taking care of the retail-ready product that Tagawa Greenhouses produced for the Home Depot and Costco stores of Colorado. Since all of their retail-ready plants are sold on a pay-by-scan

basis, Tagawa employs an entire force of people for a few weeks each year, to take care of the plants while they are in the stores, and make sure everything looks perfect for the customers. Because we had such a cold April, no one was buying the

retail-ready product, and the greenhouses were overflowing with plants. As soon as May hit, the weather started warming up and everyone was in a FRENZY to get their gardens planted. This made my merchandising experience really interesting, and very strenuous, but I had a lot of fun! Although I wasn't supposed to be in charge of anyone, and my efforts were supposed to be concentrated on very basic tasks like sweeping, and consolidating empty racks, it was difficult for me to just stand there when customers had questions, and when other merchandisers needed direction. As a result, I took charge and exercised some of my leadership skills, kept people on task, and made sure that displays looked nice for the customers. I worked twelve to fourteen-hour days for ten days straight, and was dog-tired by the end of it, but I learned a lot about myself, and my ability to manage people.

After merchandising, I spent the last seven weeks working in the greenhouse in Brighton, growing retail-ready plants. Things had really slowed down for bedding plants at that point, and the greenhouses hadn't started filling up with fall mums, pansies, and poinsettias yet, but there was still plenty to do. Luis Rios, the grower I

was working with at the time, really gave me a chance to test my skills, and powers of observation. I was working in the lowest-tech range at the Brighton facility, and rather than Luis micromanaging me, he



let me go through, make my own decisions on crops, and then discuss my thoughts and concerns with him before giving me the go-ahead. The greenhouse I was working in was one of the smallest ranges at the facility, but everything had to be hand-watered, so I very quickly figured out how to grow my plants as dry as possible, without scorching

them. It usually took me an entire day to water the whole range, so my time management skills improved greatly, as well as my understanding of moisture management in finished-containers.

One of the most rewarding and interesting parts of my internship was my project. Bill assigned my topic back in January, and I had worked on it a little bit at a time over the following months. My objective was to solve a major problem that Tagawa had been experiencing over the last couple of years at one of their plug ranges. I called upon almost everything I had learned from my coursework at ISU, and I used a great deal of collective experience that the people of Tagawa Greenhouses had as resources. I set up meetings, discussed overall project goals,



A shot of me climbing around, working on my project.

established desired parameters, and eventually, presented my solution to the leadership of the company. My presentation was very well received, and a lot of the attendees congratulated me, and seemed quite impressed with my work. There were plenty of hiccups through the whole process, and admittedly, I let a few things go until the last minute, but I learned a great deal about myself throughout the whole process. Giving someone an opportunity to put all of their skills to the test, and asking them

to accomplish something that could have a real potential impact on a company or an idea is an amazing way to help them learn, and discover their strengths as well as their weaknesses.

As intern hosts, you couldn't possibly find a better bunch than the people at Tagawa! My living quarters were very comfortable, everyone I interacted with was

very caring and helpful, and everyone was always happy to see their interns. I was always treated with the utmost respect, and everyone worked very hard to make sure that I was comfortable, and that I didn't feel isolated or alone. People took me out for more breakfasts, lunches, and dinners than I could possibly count and they made sure that I knew I was appreciated.

Overall, this internship was by far one of the most eye-opening, and rewarding experiences I have ever had in the twenty-three years I have been walking this earth. I will openly admit that I didn't get resounding praise from every person that I worked with, but you can't always please everyone. I can say with great confidence, however, that all of my experiences and connections I made working with Tagawa Greenhouses, and the guidance that Bill Kluth provided me with, will stay with me for the rest of my life. They will help me forge whatever path my career takes once I finish my undergrad at Iowa State University, and head out into the great big world.

From here, I have three semesters left in my undergraduate program, and more potential options than I know what to do with! I have already been scouted by a couple of greenhouses back in Iowa, as well as an agricultural company that I have done some research for, but I have decided to aim even higher. A few years ago, I would have said that I just wanted to be a plug grower for a large greenhouse company, somewhere in the US. Over the last year, however, I have decided that I really want to continue my education, and go on to teach horticulture and do research at a major university. I have seen and learned so much in the past few years, and nothing would make me happier than to help teach and guide young people the same way that I have been taught and guided. Not only would I have the opportunity to help answer some of the big questions that greenhouse industry faces every day, but it will also give me a chance to help motivate and inspire the next generation of bright minds who will eventually become leaders in the greenhouse business.