Introduction: Though the long and cold drive to New Hampshire was certainly not a pleasant way to start my internship experience, upon arrival in the small New England town of Loudon, I was greeted with an exciting and dynamic work environment that challenged me to adapt my classroom knowledge to an industrial, fast-paced setting. I am happy to report that not only did I fulfill the challenge of this adaptation, but I did so while seeing firsthand how a nationally and internationally recognized operation adapts to the challenges of the industry, all while forging lifetime friendships along the way.

D.S Cole Growers is an operation that primarily makes use of European-style, gable-roofed glass houses, as well as several plastic film houses and drip-tube irrigated fields. Utilizing a facility-wide hydraulic bench system with ebb and flood irrigation, as well as being almost entirely passively cooled, this operation combines both efficiency and technological innovation.

Production Department: I began my internship primarily working in the production section of the operation, where all of the crop cuttings and other progenitor materials are received, sorted, stuck into their assigned plug trays, and entered into our availability and management system, PICAS. During the months of January, February, March and April, D.S Cole is primarily a plug tray producer, shipping to all
corners of the nation, from California to Puerto Rico. While I would occasionally have the opportunity to stick cuttings myself, and thus test my speed and skill against the other workers, most of my time during peak liner production season was spent facilitating the transfer of completed trays to their assigned growing bench. After sanitizing and moving each bench into position, the “runners” would then take each tray from the stickers and place it on their assigned bench. Each taken tray would be recorded on a punch counter, and the final tally of completed trays would be recorded at the end of the day for each worker. At peak production capacity (in other words, all of the sticking benches were filled) we would have 24 people sticking cuttings at once. During slower periods, I would have the opportunity to scan the trays on the bench with a barcode reader and upload that data to the inventory management system. All the while I must also inspect the stuck trays for quality and consistency, as well as juggle a host of diverse languages and styles of communication. It was a stimulating experience to say the least!
As the season progressed, we switched from primarily sticking cuttings to placing fully rooted (and almost entirely locally produced) plugs into various pot sizes. This included, towards the end of the internship, poinsettias and chrysanthemums, my personal favorites! While both liner season and potting season provided ample challenges and rewards, I would have to say that I preferred potting season, as it allowed for a wider variety of tasks to be explored. Specifically, I learned how to operate and maintain several pieces of equipment, including a pot spacing machine, pot filler, and (my personal favorite and new at D.S Cole this season) a soil bale buster. The decision to purchase that particular piece was exciting in that it allowed a significant cost savings to be incurred, as it is no longer necessary to load by hand small bags of potting media into the potting machine by hand. Now, large bales can be purchased, cutting costs and environmental impact.

Here I am describing the many virtues of the soil bale buster.
Shipping: Up to this point I may have given the impression that I worked in a single area of the operation at once, subsequently moving on to another area after a certain amount of time. This was, for almost always the better, not the case. Concurrent with my production duties, I would regularly be sent to the shipping department to learn the various means and methods of actually delivering the quality product to the customer. From identifying and sorting the correct plug trays and (later in the season) larger potted plants by customer, to acting as de facto quality control, I quickly discovered that the shipping area of the operation was where both the greatest successes and mistakes can and do take place. Each shipping employee would be assigned a compartment in the greenhouse and be given a large list of product labels. On these labels they would find the customer name, the product name and identification number, and exactly where to find that product. This time in my internship was where I was able to leverage my strong attention to detail in order to enhance the quality of the product sent to the customer. Once in shipping the product would be further inspected for quality, size and the presence of diseases or nutritional disorders. From there it would be sorted by customer onto carts and sent to the boxing line, where I had the opportunity to see just how fast I could move! Oftentimes our customer orders overwhelmed our capacity to ship out the product, resulting in several late nights of overtime work.

Shipping at the height of liner season. The cart in the foreground is used to inspect the trays and hairnet them
Vic & Margaret Ball Internship
Student Report
Six months at D.S Cole Growers

Impact on my future career plans and future goals: If this experience can be distilled into a singular lesson, it is that the real world is almost nothing like the classroom. This may seem a trite point, but for each student, indeed each person, it is a truth which cannot be taught, only experienced. The real world is not orderly, it is not simple, and it refuses categorization and control. This is all to say that my internship was not what I expected, but it is what I needed. I needed to understand the physical and mental toll that such an environment can exact. This has allowed me to conclude that I am always going to be a part of this industry. Specifically, I am strongly considering pursuing a higher degree, and I was told in no uncertain terms that D.S Cole would like me to return and work with them full time, in particular as (possibly) someone who can oversee the trialing of new and exciting cultivars. This would certainly fulfill one of my career goals, which is to work in some capacity as a researcher or research assistant.

Conclusions: I would like to take this opportunity to say just how extremely grateful I am to the members of the American Floriculture Endowment, in particular thanks to Debi Chedester and Candice Musgrove in their crucial facilitative capacities, the Vic and Margaret Ball scholarship committee, my academic advisor Dr. Kimberly Williams, and of course all of the staff at D.S Cole, with whom I have become the best of friends. I had truly the experience of a lifetime on this internship, and I cannot express just how much it has impacted and clarified the course of my professional development. Though the precise details of my future career in horticulture may still be undecided, these past life-altering six months have shown me just how much I have to offer the industry, and how much the industry has to offer me.