VIC & MARGARET BALL
INTERNSHIP/SCHOLARSHIP
REPORT: SUMMER, 2018

Neal Mast and Sons Greenhouse- Grand Rapids, MI
I didn’t know what to expect when the American Floral Endowment awarded me the Vic & Margaret Ball Internship Scholarship and placed me in Grand Rapids, MI at Neal Mast and Sons Greenhouse. Although I had never worked for a commercial greenhouse, I was excited to see and learn new things there and advance my career to the next level. I knew it would be a good experience when I arrived and saw how well the company took care of the interns with excellent housing accommodations.

The team at Neal Mast’s Farm location were my coworkers for the summer and I couldn’t have asked for better or more patient teachers: they coached me through the steps to learning many tasks that greenhouse growers do every day, answered all my questions as well as they could and then they cut me loose to perform these tasks on my own. I was given my own section of the greenhouse to look after, but even though it was my responsibility I could go to any of the growers for advice or information about the crops there. Often, if I was asking for crop information, instead of just giving me a quick answer, they would sit down with me and show me how to find the answer for myself, using the company’s in-house computer data tools.

I learned how to use the PRIVA system for irrigating crops through drip lines (for hanging baskets), drip tape, overhead and floor sprinklers as well as flood floors that were located in different areas. I was given several tours of the Farm’s boiler room which not only housed the huge boilers that kept the greenhouses warm during the winter, but also the pumps and tanks for the flood floors and the fertilizer tanks and injectors for the entire site. During these tours, I was taught different skills: how to measure and mix fertilizer in these tanks when they were depleted from use and how to manage the flood settings on the flood tanks.

Each week there were certain tasks to complete for pest management, crop irrigation and crop growth. At the beginning of the week I set out sticky cards in each floor of my section to monitor for possible insect threats to the crop. After a twenty-four hour period, I would identify and count the insect pests caught on the cards; thrips, fungus gnats and shore flies were the most common but not the only pests I learned to identify. The sticky cards only captured the flying insects so I learned to inspect leaves with an eyeglass when searching for spider mites which live and lay their eggs on the bottom of leaves. After determining the level of threat, we would treat...
with an appropriate pesticide for the insects present or, if the pest was located in the Farm’s biocontrol area, we used biological control (usually predatory mites which we dispersed with a leaf blower).

I also learned the value of graphically tracking a crop so that we knew if it was at the right stage of growth for the spot it was on in its growth schedule. These graphical tracks are a tool that the experienced grower primarily uses to determine when to apply some form of plant growth regulator and how much to apply.

I saw and did so many things this summer at Neal Mast’s Greenhouse, that it’s impossible to fit it all into 500 words. Suffice it to say, that The American Floral Endowment gave me an incredible opportunity by finding this internship for me, Neal Mast and Sons Greenhouse was an excellent host, and I learned a lot about the industry that solidified my career goals. Best of all was my experience working with the growing team at the Farm; they patiently taught me the skills I needed, listened to my thoughts and ideas for the future and gave me invaluable advice. I am lucky and grateful to have known them and I hope I will see them again in the future as I continue with my career in horticulture production.