A Colorado Adventure: My Six-Month Journey Through Tagawa Greenhouses

By Ryan Niepagen, for the consideration of the American Floral Endowment’s Vic & Margaret Ball Scholarship Committee
From the day I was born, plants have defined my life. As a fifth-generation member of an independent garden center operation, I have always appreciated the important role floriculture plays in the lives of the customers we service and the communities we inhabit, and as I grew, my ambition became to carry on the legacy passed down to me over more than a century by continuing to grow and strengthen my family’s business that has served generations of people in central Illinois with outstanding plants and a friendly smile. To do this, I forged a path to Iowa State University with the goal of learning all that I could about the production side of the industry. I was adamant in my thought that to become truly excellent at something, one needs to master all facets of that subject. While I had come to grasp nearly all aspects of managing a retail operation, my knowledge of plant production and wholesale operations was admittedly lacking. While the outstanding degree program at Iowa State has done a great job in equipping me with that knowledge, I was thrilled to discover that I would be able to spend time working side by side industry professionals through the Vic & Margaret Ball Scholarship program. That excitement only intensified knowing that I would be doing so at Tagawa Greenhouses.

My time at Tagawa’s began at the Table Mountain facility in early January, which fell right in the prime of plug season. It was a hectic time in the greenhouses, with product going out on trucks and new trays being laid down at a seemingly never-ending rate, and I quickly realized that the “controlled chaos” I had come to associate with the industry’s peak season was a universal quality among all operations. I was surprised at just how many moving parts there were in a large business such as this and was impressed at how they came together to form a well-oiled machine that was able to ship high quality and consistent product on such a demanding schedule. It was honestly a bit intimidating to walk in blindly into such an impressive operation, and I was initially worried how and where I would fit in, especially since I was coming in during a time when supervisors and fellow staff would understandably not have time to hold my hand and walk me through tasks step by step.

Thankfully I was able to find my place within a few days, a feat I attribute to the preparation I received through classwork, as well as the welcoming nature of the greenhouse employees and managers. My initial duties consisted of assisting growers with moisture management of the plug crops, a task I found contradictorily more difficult, yet more straightforward than I had anticipated. The responsibility was made easier by the growers’ method of basing watering needs off the weight of the tray, a novel approach that was beneficial to me, as it offered an objective measure of when to irrigate as opposed to making decisions based on a subjective sense of feel and sight. Irrigation proved difficult in the sense that a grower walks a thin line between over and under watering with plug crops, and I experienced treading that line firsthand. Too dry and you risk losing the crop, too wet and you run the risk of poor root development and missing the target specification. Neither are good, and it took me a while to feel comfortable walking that tightrope.

Indeed, moisture management was the challenge I struggled with the most during my internship. The stress inherent with not wanting to come back in the morning to benches full of wilted plants was something I wrestled with quite often early on, and it took me some time to feel comfortable enough to trust my instincts, as well as the plants, that they would guide me toward success. As I continued to gain confidence, my duties expanded into mixing fertilizers, monitoring for pests, and sanitation, all of which I learned are equally as important as proper irrigation in growing a successful crop. There was certainly never a dull moment, as I was even tasked with helping install new irrigation lines, an unexpected, but enjoyable and beneficial surprise.
It was also during this time that I began to appreciate the culture ingrained into everything Tagawa’s does. The concept and importance of family is a notion that the company cherishes, and I truly did feel like I was welcomed into that family in short order. Everyone I was lucky to meet and work with treated me with an incredible amount of kindness and respect. I never felt as if I was a simple student intern during my time there, and I was extremely grateful and humbled by that.

After a couple of months, my excursion through the company continued when I moved to assist the operations department at the Foothills facility. I again found myself walking into the hectic whirlwind of peak shipping weeks but was able to navigate my way through thanks to a new group of welcoming employees and supervisors. My prime task during the six weeks here was to assist in pulling plug and liner orders and prepare them for shipment, which grew to become a task I really enjoyed. It was relatively simple work, but I was impressed at how well the process flowed. The inventory management system used by the company is incredibly intuitive, and I was fascinated by how it was able to take such a complex and labor-intensive process and effectively make it manageable for just a handful of employees. The logistics behind such a large company was an aspect I was keen to learn more about during my time in Colorado, and I was happy that I was able to get some hands-on time with that technology. Perhaps what stunned me the most during my time at Foothills was just how much product the company was shipping. It may sound odd, but the sheer number of plants going out the door blew me away. The orders never stopped coming in, and it kept me on my toes throughout my time here.

I was also able to tackle the challenges that come along with production planning. It’s an aspect of growing that I didn’t place much emphasis on before, but I quickly became aware of just how crucial crop placement in the greenhouse is to ultimately growing a quality plant. The facilities at Tagawa’s were varied in their environments, and this allowed me a better understanding of what crops work best where, and why.

Upon a successful tour at Foothills, I spent two weeks at the company’s main facilities in Brighton. Thankful for a respite from commuting, myself and my fellow interns engaged in a number of diverse tasks, from assisting with the seeding of plug trays, to helping with transplanting and gapping. What stuck with me the most during my time here was how many steps and departments a tray goes through before being delivered to the customer. It was rewarding to finally fill in the blanks that were missing in the production tour I had embarked upon previously. Here, I was able to fill the trays and lay down the seed, and when coupled with my previous experiences of germinating, growing them on, and finally putting a shipping tag on it, I could truly say that I had seen the process through from start to finish.

My next stop was a homecoming of sorts, as I traveled back to the Table Mountain greenhouses which now had their benches full of finished material, both packs and hanging baskets. Another strength of Tagawa’s intern program became apparent, as I now had the opportunity to get my feet wet with retail ready material after an excellent course in young plants. I was grateful to have the opportunity to work with both and was eager to get started. Irrigation and moisture management were my key tasks once again, and although I had grown to become comfortable managing this job with plug crops, growing finished products revealed new challenges. I have always been what could be considered a “wet” grower and trying to shift my mentality and practices to that of a “dry” grower proved to be a difficult obstacle to overcome. I was aware of the numerous benefits of dry growing, and Tagawa’s methods makes them an excellent place to develop such a critical skill, but flipping that switch was
easier said than done. The decision of when to irrigate had shifted to more subjective criteria as well, judging water needs based on soil color and feel, as well as the appearance of the plants, compounding the initial difficulties I faced. It was admittedly a struggle early on, as I felt that we were pushing certain crops far beyond their limits in terms of dryness, and there were a handful of times that I had to stop myself from picking up a hose and going against the advice of the seasoned greenhouse staff who were counselling me. It was tough, but I eventually became comfortable enough with the plants and the guidance of the growers to call myself a dry grower by the end. Working with retail ready material also introduced me to the world of plant growth regulators, including which product is right for the job at hand, application rates, and application techniques. It was a new experience for me, and one I became increasingly comfortable with the more time I spent with them.

After a short month back at Table Mountain, we departed from the rocky landscape of Colorado for a two-week expedition to Tagawa’s facilities in New Mexico. It was a trip a thoroughly enjoyed, and I left with a new batch of knowledge that I knew would be beneficial to my career goals. The first lessons came with the greenhouses themselves. Tagawa’s New Mexico facilities is an impressive array of newer style Dutch glass greenhouses, a stark contrast to the older greenhouses I had become accustomed to, with their generally lower gutter heights and polycarbonate or polyethylene glazing. The opportunity to work with and in a newer, more technologically advanced facility was welcome, and dissecting the quirks and differences between it and the older structures was a beneficial prospect. Additionally, the facility’s use of Priva environmental controls afforded me the chance to add the operation of another system to my growing repertoire when coupled with my experience with ARGUS systems at Tagawa’s Colorado facilities.

Perhaps my most memorable experiences in New Mexico came while working with the company’s succulent program. My knowledge of the plants was limited before I arrived, and I was eager to learn more about them given their meteoric rise in popularity in recent years. Tagawa was able to fulfill my desire, letting me work with their stock plant and liner programs, as well as retail ready containers. Their growers were extremely gracious, walking me through proper irrigation techniques, nutrient requirements, pest management issues, and propagation methods, and I left feeling much more confident with the plants than I did upon my arrival. My time in New Mexico also afforded me the chance to work with the facility’s biological pest control program which turned out to be an excellent experience. I was walked through the pros and cons of the program, which beneficial insects are used for each specific pest, and timing and cycles of applications. I had studied the use of beneficial insects extensively, but the opportunity to get some hands-on time with them in a large-scale operation was fantastic.

My time in New Mexico was regrettably short, but the return to Colorado and the program’s shift to working in the retail setting proved captivating. As someone with a background in the operations of an independent garden center, the two weeks I spent at Home Depot stores in the Denver metropolitan area were fascinating and incredibly beneficial. Observing the customer base-how and why they buy-in addition to the philosophies and tactics employed by the company’s merchandisers, afforded me several new strategies I can take home and implement which will hopefully provide some competitive edge with the big box retailers.

The most interesting observation I made during my time there was the generally younger customer base the stores attracted compared to our operation at home. Trying to capture that 18-35
age demographic has been one of our top priorities in recent years and has been a bit of a struggle despite numerous marketing strategies and programs. After spending time in a handful of different Home Depot garden centers, I settled on the word “simplicity” to sum up how I concluded the stores enjoy their success and how they capture that coveted demographic. Pre-finished mixed containers and hanging baskets seemed to be the hot item flying off the benches, lending credence to the perceived trend in the industry of customers wanting a “no-fuss” product, leading me to believe that we can increase our efforts at home to push our container programs. The idea of simplicity extended to product selection in the stores as well. In comparison to many independent stores, Home Depot doesn’t offer a very diverse or robust selection of plants; for example, customers may only have one choice of petunia in terms of series, offered in only a handful of different colors. Compare this to a typical independent store, who may be selling three or four different series of petunia, with multiple different shades of a single color. In many ways, I believe that a wider selection of product is a strength and one of the ways an independent retailer can differentiate themselves from the large chain stores, but I’ve also theorized in my years of talking with and observing shoppers that the sheer amount of choices can be intimidating and off-putting to the novice gardener. It’s an aspect of merchandising I’ve been interested in for some time, and my time working here allowed me to gather more information on the matter. It is, of course, a delicate balance, but parsing down varieties to the most popular options is a tactic I would be interested in trying to better serve customers back home.

My tour of Tagawa’s retail operations continued with a week at their independent garden center, Tagawa Gardens, which I can safely say is one of the finest in the country. It was an honor to be able to exchange ideas with some of the best in the industry, and I learned an incredible amount that I can take home with me. Of specific benefit was learning more about their social marketing programs, as well as their vast community outreach efforts, two areas I am keen to expand on back home.

Our final weeks with the company were spent touring various departments in the Brighton offices, while shadowing employees and managers and lending a hand with an assortment of tasks. We were able to meet with a wide variety of divisions within the company from sales and customer service, to inventory management and human resources. It was a very beneficial journey and again showed me the number of factors that go into running a successful operation. The most interesting department in my eyes was our time spent with shipping operations. An incredible amount of research and thought goes into the logistics of getting plants to their final destination, and it was exciting to learn how the company plans routes, loads trucks, and contracts drivers to ensure customers receive their products on time and in good condition. It was an aspect of the industry I didn’t put much thought into before, but I now understand the importance of and challenges inherent with shipping.

As I reflect on my six months in Colorado, I am certain that what I learned will benefit me for years to come no matter what path I choose to go down. While my focus is still to eventually take over the family garden center upon graduating and after my parents step aside, what I learned of the production and wholesale side of the industry will allow me to achieve my principal goal of overseeing and increasing inhouse plant production upon my return, while also being able to strengthen the relationships with our supply partners through a better understanding of their methods and challenges they face. In addition, I was able to further enhance my expertise in retail operations, while gaining valuable skills in business and employee management. I simply could not ask for more from my time spent with the company. I feel now that I have the confidence to tackle any challenge this industry may throw at me, and I am very thankful for that.
None of this would have been possible without the help and support of everyone at Tagawa’s. I cannot say enough good things about their intern program and the company as a whole. Their hospitality and guidance were amazing, and I will forever cherish the relationships I forged there. Everyone in the company from the top down was incredibly kind and supportive, and I am more thankful for that than they know. I was proud to call myself my member of the Tagawa family and to work alongside such a fantastic group of people.

Finally, I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to the American Floral Endowment and the Vic & Margaret Ball Scholarship committee for giving me this once in a lifetime opportunity. I am humbled by the faith you put in me to carry out the mission of the organization, and I truly hope I was able to meet your expectations. Thank you for all you do, and I look forward to working with you in the future.