

Erin Sparkman
American Floral Endowment
Vic & Margaret Ball Internship Student Report
August 21, 2019

This summer, I began my internship on May 22, as a wholesale grower for Neal Mast Greenhouses, in Grand Rapids, Michigan. I worked for them until August 15. This internship gave me so much insight to what exactly a grower does from day to day. I learned how to measure and track a crop's growth throughout its growing period, how to track the pests that could be harming it week to week, and how to decide what strategy to use to alleviate the problem. Among those tasks, I learned even more about how to properly water crops in bays using the correct breaker, how to operate flood floors, and how PRIVA, a program used for the mechanics of greenhouses, works. This internship has given me a deeper understanding of what I see myself doing in the future, post-graduation.

My favorite part of this internship was getting at my location at 6 am for work, in time to watch the sun rise through the glass ceilings of the greenhouse. The sunlight would peer through, resting in the dew drops on tops of the crops in the morning, setting the leaves aglow. The glass walls were lit in a beautiful orange and it would transition slowly as the morning passed. It was so restful to watch every morning. When I first got to Neal Mast Greenhouses, they were growing dahlias, which are my favorite flower, and sunflowers. By the time I left, they were shipping out mums and receiving plugs of poinsettias. I enjoyed seeing these flowers from the plug stages grow week by week into the adult stage, ready to be shipped. It was really rewarding to go to the store and see plants that we had grown on the shelves. It was also incredibly satisfying to see the direct results of my work, weeks later.

However, my least favorite part of this internship was spraying so many chemicals so often on the crops we were growing. Even though we followed all instructions according to the

Erin Sparkman
American Floral Endowment
Vic & Margaret Ball Internship Student Report
August 21, 2019

label on the package of the chemical we were applying and used PPE (personal protective equipment) when we applied it, I feel as though there isn't enough research to know that one is not still affected long term by the exposure of chemicals even if it is in small increments.

Through this experience, I did learn in abundance about the purpose of each chemical and became familiar with them by name. In my classes, we had only learned about five plant growth regulators. In this internship, through real life experience, I have learned through applications of all plant growth regulators, fungicides, pesticides, herbicides, and biological control. No other experience besides this internship or class could have given me the knowledge that this internship did.

In class at Mississippi State University as a horticulture major, I felt prepared for this internship because the daily schedule of being a wholesale grower was introduced to me. Even though I did not have a full understanding of what I would be doing, I gained that through kinesthetics. Most of this internship involved following directions and paying attention. I feel lucky to have been assigned the location of "the farm" at Neal Mast Greenhouses because out of all of the locations, mine had the most greenhouses and biggest variety of crops. Because of this, there were more growers I would be working with. Through that, my position as an intern allowed me to bounce from grower to grower on a daily basis to help them, where I was able to learn more about different crops and the different specifications they required. I was thankful for this and that I had Joe as my boss. Joe is the type of boss that doesn't leave a question unanswered and is always approachable. He was always willing to let me join him to accomplish any task and he always took the time to explain something to me with much patience. I really appreciated that and feel extremely privileged to have worked under him for three months.

Erin Sparkman
American Floral Endowment
Vic & Margaret Ball Internship Student Report
August 21, 2019

This internship taught me that I am getting my degree in something that I am most definitely passionate about: plants. It motivated me to work harder so I can begin my career in this field. I enjoyed not sitting behind a desk all day, getting outside in the weather to check on crops, walking through greenhouses breathing in fresh oxygen, and smelling the sweet fragrance of flowers. I don't think that being a wholesale grower is specifically something that I could see myself doing, but working with plants on a daily basis, is. I want a career in plant pathology, genetics or conservation. This internship gave me more insight into that realization.

I am grateful for the American Floral Endowment because of the Vic and Margaret Ball Intern Scholarship which paid for the class and summer tuition itself, and for the opportunity to travel and reside in a place I've never been before, Grand Rapids, MI. Not only did AFE help me obtain an internship, but it helped get an internship that was paid and included free housing, which was a huge financial blessing. I would recommend other students to apply to AFE a million times over. I know it can be scary branching out to go to a new place for a summer and to meet people you've never met before, but it is so worth it. My internship grew me as a student of life, professionally and personally.

I have three more semesters before I graduate from Mississippi State University with a Bachelors in Horticulture, specifically in floriculture. I plan on working more summer internships to gain further experience in the work field. I also plan on pursuing my master's degree. My internship with Neal Mast Greenhouses and the American Floral Endowment helped mold me into the horticulturist I am today and who I will be in the future. Thank you.