

I thoroughly enjoyed my summer working as an intern at Neal Mast Greenhouses in Grand Rapids, Michigan. I was incredibly lucky to receive the opportunity to live in a house on the company property, in a beautiful area full of lush fields and apple orchards, and walk just a few minutes to work at a pair of large greenhouses with a great variety of ornamental plants. In assisting growers and on my own, I was able to learn a wealth of skills in greenhouse work, from irrigation, to pest and disease scouting and control, to mixing fertilizer, to cleaning and sanitizing equipment and infrastructure, to gaining experience troubleshooting and responding to sudden issues on the fly.

Working at the oldest greenhouse location at the company gave me the unique opportunity to work with a variety of irrigation systems and controls installed at various points in time, including Priva for controlling heating, ventilation, fog, sprinklers, drippers, and some booms, Cherry Creek and Basic E boom controls, Buckner and Rain Bird controls for drip irrigation in the outside fields and gardens, manual flood floors, and, of course, hoses for hand-watering. I also was able to use programs written by the company to calculate fertilizer, pesticide, and fungicide concentrations and mix and apply these via injectors, dosatron, hoses, backpack sprayers, and a hydraulic sprayer. I was able to observe and participate in every stage of plant production from propagation to finish. Arriving in May allowed me to be present for the last few weeks of a large variety of annual and some perennial spring crops including lantana, verbena, petunias, gardenias, calibrachoa, vinca, phlox, various impatiens, lupins, echinacea, gerbera, celosia, and more in many combinations, as well as organic herbs, tomatoes, peppers, and strawberries, and I observed the process of growers meeting and maintaining spec while the sales department found homes for the many thousands of plants. I helped ready the greenhouse and fields for hundreds of thousands of chrysanthemums, helping to measure their growth and take pest data with sticky cards, and was involved in the propagation process for Christmas cactus and poinsettias. However, my favorite aspect of the job was that I was charged with the Mast Young Plants display garden, housing over 1500 varieties of ornamental plants and 500 unique combinations, and the trial garden, with around 1200 cultivars (including different colors) including a 200-variety dahlia trial and in-ground All-American Selection trials. Observing the gardens going from empty to flush with color was incredibly rewarding, and I became familiar with the care of many plants I had never before worked with.

This experience was invaluable in the course of my education, giving context to what I have learned and what I will continue to learn in my courses, and inspiring me and giving me direction as I approach graduation and contemplate my future career. I would love to work as a greenhouse grower, and the experience I gained will help me in such a job and in any other endeavors I might pursue, including my pipe dream of someday having a small greenhouse business of my own.