

As a part of the Paul Thomas Intern of the Year Award, I was able to attend the Cultivate conference, where industry professionals from all over the world came together to discuss the current state of the industry, share research, present new technologies and products, and network at one of the largest events I have ever attended. I was absolutely amazed at the scope of it, with not only all the big name companies and producers, but people from every facet of the green industry, from research professors to small local greenhouse managers.



By attending educational sessions, I was able to meet like-minded individuals in the industry who had experience in my fields of interest, and not only learn from them, but develop professional connections with both the speakers and the attendees. From a few sessions alone, I was able to network in a way where I found businesses, non-profit groups, and potential employers that were doing exactly what I wanted to do both across the country and only a few hours from my home. They directed me towards certification programs, potential careers I had never considered, further educational materials, and even another potential internship at what is essentially my dream job. Needless to say, I got a lot of value out of attending these sessions alone!



Through Cultivate, I was able to attend both a tour of the OSU Cultivar Trials Garden and the Franklin Park Conservatory with other plant people. The cultivar garden tour was an especially unique experience, listening to nursery growers consider the merits and downsides of the new varieties of plants on display in a way that changed how I think about annuals that are selected for production. As beautiful and enjoyable the conservatory tour was, it was just as impressive to see green industry people in their element outside of the greenhouse, discussing cultivars in such a different way than the specimens at the botanical garden.

One of the most valuable experiences of the trip was attending a networking event with the AFE Young Professionals Council. Talking to people close to my age who were already part of the industry extended a sense of direction I hadn't realized I was missing. It gave me a sense of the "next step" in my journey of finding a career. Hearing their experiences and advice, being able to have more casual conversations in a more laid-back environment, really helped to solidify a sense of belonging.



I would like to thank AFE and Vic & Margaret Ball committee for all of the amazing opportunities I have been privileged to experience over the course of the last year, as well as the Paul Thomas Intern of the Year Award. These experiences have been invaluable to me, allowing me to consider paths in the industry I might not have known of otherwise and help me develop connections that will no doubt continue to impact me and my future career for years to come.