

Vic and Margaret Ball Internship Report

Skagit Gardens, Inc., Mount Vernon, Washington

May, 2010 – November, 2010

Introduction and Summary

My Vic and Margaret Ball internship experience began on Monday, May 10, 2010, as I left from Adel, Iowa, on a 1,800-mile road trip to the town of Mount Vernon, WA. Along the way, I got to enjoy a vast amount of scenery that I had never



experienced before because this was my first time northwest of South Dakota. Driving from Iowa to the middle of South Dakota was a bit boring, but everywhere west of South Dakota was incredible. I truly got a sense of why this is such a great nation to live in. I arrived on Wednesday May 12, 2010, around 12:30 in the afternoon. I was greeted by my new roommate Jim R. and Faith Conway at the living quarters for the interns. The house is located on the main site of the company, which was very convenient. I was given a brief tour of the house as well as some information on paperwork that needed to be taken care of before my internship started. I used the rest of Wednesday and Thursday to unpack and get settled in and began my working experience on Friday. I experienced many aspects of the company throughout the six-month term, some of which included propagation, finished-plant production, young-plant production,

experimentation of new products, research and development, plant cut-back crews, garden and landscape maintenance, landscape design and installation, and deck container design and installation. My overall experience at Skagit Gardens was great. My final day was on Friday, November 19, but in a way, I wish it wasn't my last. I not only got to work at a great place, but I also got to work with some amazing people. At the end of my experience, I found myself ready to go home, but not ready to leave such an amazing place.



Work Performed

During my stay at Skagit Gardens, I got to experience many aspects of the company. Some of my first working experiences occurred in propagation on the sticking belt. The workers at the sticking belt processed all of the cuttings and tissue culture. It was a good experience in the sense that I got to be involved in the process of propagation on a much larger scale than I was ever used to, but the monotony of sticking cuttings all day long was definitely a frustration. Some of the workers on the sticking belt had been working there for 15+ years, and I must say, "My hat is off to them."

After working on the sticking belt for a couple weeks, I got to work with the cut-back crew that runs the larger cut back machine that processes liners. The machine was quite impressive and large. During the first couple days of working, I was shocked at the amount of plant material we cut back, but looking back on it now, I can understand the need. I also got to be involved

with some consolidation and cleaning of liners with the cut-back crew as well. Consolidation is another job that has monotony written all over it, and I wasn't the biggest fan of it as well.

My next experience dealt with growing and maintaining some of the finished material in the greenhouse range labeled, "the 05 range", as well as working with stock. During my time in crop care, I conducted three experiments that involved a starch based granular product that can be incorporated into the root medium for enhanced water and nutrient retention. While I was working in this range I got to experience many aspects that were very beneficial. I really enjoyed my time in the finished production areas.

After working with stock and finished crop care, I then began working in the research and development department. I was mainly involved with some clean-up and transplanting of trial plants of many species but many of which were *Helleborus*. I was also involved with some crop care of some plant material that was to be used in future trade shows and events as well as all the trial plants.

I was then transferred to the company's other location on the west side of Mount Vernon,



called the river-bend site. During my time at river-bend, I got to conduct a lot of exciting trials with some new products. I was involved with some experiments that were geared toward eradication and control of liverwort (*Mercantia polymorpha*). I was able to perform many experiments with three products that

showed some promise for liverwort control. I also got to be involved with general crop care for the finished growers.

After my time at river-bend, I returned to the main site and began working with the seedling grower Mayra. I had a great time working with Mayra, and she was a very good teacher. She was very informative and answered every question I had for her as best and completely as she could. She also helped me work on a lot of general techniques from watering to pesticide application and timing. I also got to get some experience with plant growth regulators, which I am in desperate need of. I do wish I could have spent a little more time with Mayra.



Some other jobs performed during my stay involved things like garden maintenance and landscaping as well as some deck pot design, installation, and maintenance. I designed and installed a landscape for a bare piece of ground out in the employee parking lot. The main office

also had some deck pots that ranged in size from 12" to 48" that I got to design and install, which was a lot of fun. I also worked on the patch crew for one day and performed duties like pre-pricing pots/flats and patching liners.

Skills Learned

Throughout my internship, I gained a lot of skills that will be very beneficial to my future and education. I acquired many beneficial techniques and procedures for large-scale production of both finished and young-plant crops. I would have to say the most important skill I have learned is the actual hands-on experience. I have always worked with somewhat smaller groups of plants, and I was able to work with very large groups of plants at Skagit Gardens. I now understand the need for maximum production and management efficiencies while

maintaining crop quality. I feel like I have acquired a deeper understanding of what is needed for mass production, and this will allow me to better analyze situations and conditions in the future to make more educated decisions. Another skill I learned involves computer systems and tools for growers. Skagit Gardens uses a computer system called Navision to track almost everything electronically, and I was able to become more proficient with that tool. I also gained the skill and proficiency of using multiple boom systems in many greenhouses to irrigate/fertigate crops on both the ground and on benches. Another thing that really isn't a skill but more an experience is growing in such a different climate than what I was generally used to. The plant material that was available was far more diverse and I was able to learn many new species of plants that I had never seen or heard of before. I also learned many new cultivars of species that I was already familiar with. By far the most important skill I learned was the overall hands-on experience throughout all the aspects that I was involved in. It is one thing to go to school and take multiple classes to further your education, but I would have to say that the "hands-on" experience/education is a must. It helps you better understand what you are proficient at and what you really need to work on in the future.

Host Company

Skagit Gardens was an amazing host as both a work place and living quarters. There are some amazing people working at Skagit Gardens. I went crabbing with Ernie Uy and explored many restaurants and places with both Sharon Stapleton and Faith Conway along the way. I was also able to go to a McConkey Co. Tradeshow/Seminar with Gary Hartnett and a Lean Manufacturing Seminar at Smith Gardens. I gained some valuable experiences at the tradeshow and seminars, and I learned many new things. I was able to go on a guided tour of

the facility where McConkey Co. manufactures many of their plastic products. Some of the products that were being manufactured were pots of many sizes as well as trays and flats of many sizes. The molding machines were extremely massive and very fast as well. I also got the chance to talk with many people that are in the industry at both events, which was very beneficial.

My living quarters were conveniently located right on the property of the main site, and the greenhouses were within walking distance. The house was about five minutes away from the main office and grower's office, which was very nice. The house wasn't the newest, but I was definitely comfortable and had plenty of room. The house was clean and a majority of the needed essentials were provided. Skagit Gardens also gave me a \$50.00 gift card to the local Safeway groceries store for supplies, which was very generous. Overall, I was very pleased with both my home and the company.

Future Plans

My future plans involve going back to school in January for the spring semester. During the spring semester I will be working with Dr. Richard Gladon as an undergraduate research assistant on a new research project. I am then going to do another summer internship at another wholesale nursery (Swift's Greenhouses, Inc., in Gilman, IA). After the summer is over I am going to return to school for my final semester at Iowa State University. I am then going to find a position in the greenhouse industry that involves production of young plants or finished plants (possibly both), and I would also like to venture into the research aspects of horticulture during my career.