

Vic & Margaret Ball Internship Report: 6 Months at Smith Gardens in Aurora, OR



By Kendell Lolley

Upon arrival to Aurora, OR in January of 2016, I was eager to gain knowledge and experience at the large-scale finish grower, Smith Gardens. With past employment consisting of five seasons at a small-scale greenhouse, three years at the Kansas State student-run organic vegetable farm, and a year as an undergraduate assistant for a researcher in the KSU Plant Transformation Lab. I was enthusiastic to compare, immediately gaining awareness of the variation in philosophy, technique, and limitless opportunity the horticulture industry harbors. Smith is a wholesale supplier to big box stores: Wal-Mart, Lowes, and Home Depot in the Northwest and Alaska. I was amazed by the sheer quantity of plants under the gutter connected greenhouse range. I began where the plants began, scheduling and planning. Then, through transplanting, pest management, inventory, leadership meetings, LEAN events, maintenance, and my truest passion: growing. I also toured the corporate offices and two of Smith's locations in Washington. Six months at Smith's was an eye-opening experience, I learned much more than I was anticipating. After completing my internship through the American Floral Endowment, I feel I am a better equipped and more well-rounded horticulturist, confident in her beliefs.

The genuine experience began at the end of a conveyor belt, patching 10-06 petunia flats with plugs the robotic transplant machine missed. Smith receives the majority of their plant material from Pacific Plug and Liner in California. The amount of plugs and soil used daily was notable. Soil comes in by semi truckload from Sungro. A day in peak season could easily use well over eighty cubic yards of the locally sourced Douglas fir bark and pumice blend. With four transplant lines operating, the crew can easily produce over 20,000 units in a day. Work was not taken away from humans with the robotic planter, as I had originally perceived. There were just as many people patching, tagging, and loading shuttle trays, as there were on the primitive hand-dibble conveyor belt I had experienced in the past. With the large amount of turnover and new hires, I also quickly experienced a culture shock. I was one of the few people in the transplant room that could not communicate in Spanish. As an individual going to school to be in a managerial position, I see communication as the frontrunner of ethical leadership. I feel it is my responsibility to learn this frequently spoken language and plan to start taking classes.



Performing a test on
Petunias checking for
Tobacco Mosaic Virus

After transplanting, I moved onto Integrated Pest Management (IPM), focusing on the common greenhouse pests through all life cycles and methods in removing them. Especially interested biological pest control, I enjoyed sprinkling *Persmilis* in the hydrangea greenhouses to

combat a spider mite problem from overwintered plants. The Smith's location in Aurora doesn't have the extensive beneficial insect program like the locations in Washington. This allowed the ability to gain valuable experience in diagnosing a problem, reading chemical labels, mixing and preparing pesticides, fungicides, or herbicide for sprays, drenches, and fogs. Out of my comfort zone, which was important for me to experience. An important lesson learned, is refining the way of thinking to preventively rather than when the problem is present.

Many sets of eyes watch Smith's plants to make sure they meet ready dates, that is where inventory and growing come in. Daily walks with different groups throughout the property ensure the plants are to size or ready to meet nation wide ad campaigns. The growth habit is manipulated by an array of Plant Growth Regulators. The Section Growers have some freedom in deciding what a crop needs, but the Head Grower



Operating the pulse fogger in a Hydrangea greenhouse, targeting mites and thrips.

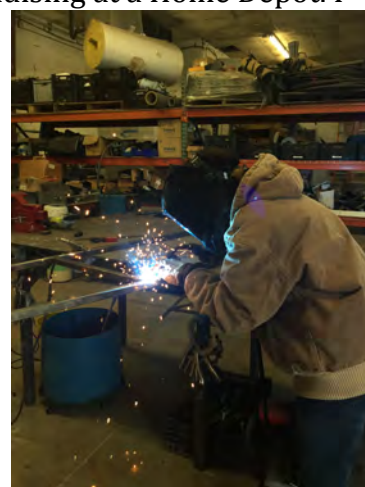


Counting Snapdragons for Inventory

with the needs of the store in mind, makes most of the big decisions. It was surprising to see the amount of hand watering still utilized in such a massive facility. The growers spend most of their day keeping up with watering or preventative drenches. Even with two assigned employees as irrigators, the acreage a grower is responsible for is an impressive feat. Aurora is planning a seven-acre expansion of greenhouse space and adding two new section growers, making seven total. The expansion will add more cascading flood floors (two ranges out of 12 currently have these floors) and more automated watering. This will grant more freedom and time to the section growers.

To ensure the plants are at their stores by ad weeks, I rode along on two overnight deliveries around Oregon and Washington. We dropped off orders and picked up empty racks from stores. Days started at 11pm and ended around 2pm the following day. I now, more than ever, know that I'm not meant to be a truck driver. However, seeing the final product in the store was very gratifying. After deliveries, I worked two weeks merchandising at a Home Depot. I loved setting up displays, unloading orders, and caring for the plants. The most rewarding experience for me, was watching all the customers walk away with a big smile carrying the plants I helped grow. I was able to help a family start a vegetable garden and gave gardening advice to patrons just starting out. A real full-circle sort of experience, I was referred to as 'the Horticulturist' for the first time, I was proud.

My experience at Smith Gardens was priceless and unforgettable. I was able to witness a full season of production, from the transplant line to watching the consumer leave the store with a car full of plants. With this internship, I have officially decided I will continue my education past a Bachelor in Horticulture with emphasis in Greenhouse Management. The direction I am headed is to become an apothecary, herbalist, or naturopath. The school I am currently looking at is located in Washington. A fellow Kansas State Alumni in the Smith Gardens



Learning how to weld- a catwalk for the shipping docks in Maintenance.

Marysville, WA location, has also offered me a job. I would be working in a trial garden with new species of plants and networking with breeders. My tentative plan is to accept this job after graduation from K-State, in one year. Then, work in Marysville until I gain my residency and while attending school. With my passion for growing plants, the dream is to provide for the community in some way, shape, or form. Learning how to magnify this passion while focusing on a specific goal is key. Working with plants in a medicinal setting will be my niche. I know that happiness will follow me weather I am growing, arranging, utilizing, or simply around plants. I am enthusiastic for what the future holds.

I would like to thank the American Floral Endowment and the Vic and Margaret Ball Scholarship program for granting me this incredible opportunity. I recommend this to any undergraduate, regardless of the experience you may possess. A huge thank you to Smith Gardens for taking me under their wing, and showing me all the things they do. I would also like to thank my wonderful host family, for welcoming me into their house and making me feel at home. I will remember these six months for the rest of my life, for they have reshaped me. It's difficult to explain my experience in a few hundred words... I left Smith Gardens with new friends, refined knowledge, a potential career, and a fresh outlook to my future, for that I am perpetually grateful.

