

Internships: Educating Tomorrow's Growers

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I'll never forget my first internship. I worked in the DC/Baltimore Area as a landscaper after my freshman year at West Virginia University. I learned a great deal about plants, got in great shape, worked an average of 50 hours per week, and earned enough money for rent and meals for my sophomore year. Unfortunately it was an intense, exhausting (sometimes back-breaking), inhospitable experience that only paid minimum wage. That is why I have a career in floriculture. During my junior and senior summers I had a rewarding experience at a 2-acre greenhouse range in Southern Maryland. I earned \$8.50 an hour and worked an average of 45 hours per week. The instruction and guidance from the owner and head grower were outstanding.

Based on those fruitful internship experiences I can tell you that the purpose of practical work experience through a university program is not simply to get paid and receive credit. More importantly students develop skills, receive compensation and advisement from growers and professors, and really earn their grade. Most of all the experience is a time for students to apply their book knowledge and receive real-world experience.

Now as a junior faculty member at the University of Florida, I hear similar stories from students who have participated in internships. The most common statement made by students is that the experience "really opened their eyes to the industry." For some it has established direction, but for others it alerts them of what they don't want to do with their education. Either way internships are a good thing. Ultimately, they help shape a student's career path. Now that you have heard my story, let's discuss the burning issues students and growers face when it comes to internships.

Where are the growers?

There appears to be a shortage of graduates interested in becoming growers primarily because of low salaries and long hours. In the 80's and 90's students from farms were the primary source of growers that wished to receive horticulture degrees. These hard working individuals came back to the family farm or started their own business. Because greenhouse production is becoming highly technical, there is a demand for students to become growers. In 1998 5,000 people were employed as nursery or greenhouse managers. According to one job market report, the demand for nursery and greenhouse managers is expected to increase by 15.1% by 2008. There are now some outstanding internship programs available for students to become experienced growers. Below are a few of the top programs that provide or advertise internships for students and greenhouse operations.

Organization	Phone	Contact Email/Web site
American Floral Endowment	618.692.0045	afe@endowment.org
Ohio International Agricultural & Horticultural Intern Program	614.292.7720	mchrisma@magnus.acs.ohio-state.edu
Perennial Plant Association	614.771.8431	www.perennialplant.org
Global Outreach	612.333.2353	www.globaloutreach.net
Jobs in Horticulture	800.428.2472	info@hortjobs.com
Florapersonnel, Inc.	407.320.8177	www.florapersonnel.com

What's going on with the Universities?

Teaching faculty typically serve as mentors for students while in school; unfortunately, as programs downsize due to tightening budgets, the interaction between students and teachers decrease. This ultimately limits the opportunities for educators to encourage students to pursue careers in floriculture.

There are real world situations offered in the college setting. Land grant institutions and community college programs with applied horticulture programs typically have lab components to greenhouse courses which familiarize students with crop production. One of the big holes that

universities need to fill is personnel management. Role play activities and group projects help, but learning to interact with others to achieve a common goal can be quite challenging. Another reason students do not come out of the university with more growing experience is the amount of elective credits that are required. Participating in an internship sometimes gets thrown to the curb by horticulture programs encouraging “well-roundedness.”

Today there is a greater influence of grower education from the industry. One example is a Stakeholder in Residence Grant that was awarded to The Ohio State University’s Horticulture Program in 2002-2003. This allows greenhouse professionals to interact with floriculture faculty within the Department of Horticulture and Crop Sciences, as well as with floriculture support faculty in the Departments of Agricultural Engineering, Plant Pathology, and Entomology. One disadvantage of the program is the difficulty finding growers who would come in during the busy winter production months to teach lessons. This opportunity to instruct students becomes even harder when the spring shipping season comes around.

Growers are encouraged to contact individuals in the university responsible for internship programs. Below is internship contact information for universities that participate in the Southeast Greenhouse Conference.

Auburn University	Harry Ponder	hponder@acesag.auburn.edu	334.844.4862
Clemson University	Ted Whitwell	twhtwll@clemson.edu	864.656.4971
Univ. of Georgia	Tim Smalley	tsmalley@uga.edu	706.542.0788
Univ. of Florida	Lisa Hall	lhall@ifas.ufl.edu	352.392.1831
North Carolina State Univ.	Bryce Lane	bryce_lane@ncsu.edu	919.515.3189
Univ. of Tennessee	Gary McDaniel	glm@utk.edu	865.974.7324
Virginia Tech	Jerry Williams	williamj@vt.edu	540.231.5655

Who gets what in an internship?

Students gain professional experience, the opportunity to implement principles learned in the classroom, new skills that offer an advantage over other less experienced graduates, contacts for future employment, and a chance to evaluate their goals and career interests. Owners, managers, or supervisors get the opportunity to teach, develop personnel skills, and discover hard-working, dedicated individuals that may someday grow for them. Some managers find that interns can be in charge of their IPM or nutritional monitoring programs. With the strong emphasis on foreign language credits in college, some operations may get students that speak Spanish fluently.

What about the student’s needs?

An internship sometimes means that a student has to relocate. Students have the right to ask about transportation to and from work, housing, dress code, compensation, and benefits. All of these questions should be answered promptly. Treat your time with a potential intern just like what you would do for an interview. There will always be highly motivated, average, or below average students interested in internships. Owners, managers, and supervisors should institute a thorough screening process to ensure the business has the right person for the job.

What should owners, managers, or supervisors offer the intern?

Interns need to be treated as apprentices, not just individuals that need work to get paid. Apartment rentals and security deposits are great to offer. Some firms provide housing with a smaller wage. On-site apartments should provide the essentials; interns want to live in housing facilities that remind them of home.

Because some interns may have only 1 or 2 horticulture courses under their belt, the chances for confusion, frustration, and lack of confidence may be present. Greenhouse operations should be sure to have “big picture” days with the intern as these are important in the learning process. There should also be one contact person in the operation; students get frustrated when there are multiple bosses with multiple agendas.

Owners, managers, or supervisors need to provide the student with a well rounded education in the greenhouse. Some small operations may feel that their facilities are too small to administer an internship program. The fact is you don't have to be big to start an internship program. Below is a list of tasks that an intern can do at your operation.

- preparing media
- potting
- spacing plants
- pinching (specify crops)
- sticking cuttings (specify crops)
- preparing fertilizer stock solutions
- maintenance of irrigation system
- preparing and applying pesticide sprays
- preparing and applying pesticide aerosols (bombs)
- preparing and applying growth regulators
- weeding
- maintenance of cooling system/heating system
- staking and tying plants
- sleeving and packaging plants
- loading delivery trucks
- delivery of orders
- disbudding
- spot watering
- moving plants
- disinfecting benches, tools, etc.
- applying black cloth or aid in maintenance of mechanized black cloth systems
- assist in application and/or removal of poly or saran covering
- mow weeds around greenhouse and nursery area
- application of soil fumigants
- application of herbicides
- preparation and application of soil drenches

What should the student be prepared for with an internship?

The best times for internships are during the months of December to April because summertime work is minimal unless greenhouse improvements or propagation are common activities from May to August. There is an underlying disadvantage to an internship during the busy season because there is minimal time to learn. Students may experience several different divisions of the firm but may not get the big picture.

What should owners, managers or supervisors do to acquire a full time employee?

A common outcome from an internship is that a student does not plan on being a permanent employee once the degree is attained. They may go into business for themselves or move on to another business to get more experience or work with a different style of management or even continue on with graduate studies. One method to retain interns as full time employees is to treat them as confident greenhouse specialists with a comfortable salary. Graduates who enter the Horticulture or Floriculture Industry make between \$25,000 to 35,000. Based on the 2000 GrowerTalks Wage and Benefits Survey a grower's salary with less than 3 years experience was \$22,321. Students with a 2-year, 4-year, or advanced degree make \$22,855, \$29,834, or \$37,924, respectively.