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Growing Talent: Creating a Mutually Beneficial Internship Program

Internship programs ensure that there is new talent and passion coming into the floriculture industry and, hopefully, your business.

It's no secret that labor continues to be a challenge in the greenhouse industry. Not only is it difficult to find employees to work on transplant lines and in shipping, but it is also a challenge to find [new employees](#) to move through the ranks to become the future leaders of your company. According to [Greenhouse Grower's State of the Industry](#) report, most greenhouse operation owners are over age 55 (65%). Some greenhouse owners are preparing succession plans for their children, while others are putting their businesses up for sale or selling to real estate firms where the land is highly valuable. Particularly within the last year, I have seen many shake-ups in greenhouse businesses in west Michigan. How can you, as a business owner or manager, prepare yourself for the future? How do you ensure that there's a pipeline of new talent and passion coming into the business? Internships! Yes, hosting interns can be time-consuming, but hopefully you can recruit a bright, fresh person into the industry, and maybe even your business (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Interns provide fresh eyes and can take on special projects such as plant trial evaluations. Photo: Bill Winchell, Raker-Roberta's Young Plants.

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What's in it for you?

Interns at your business can provide the opportunity to have additional help and maybe even complete a special project that has been put on the back burner for too long. You can showcase your business and even expose a student to other aspects of the greenhouse industry. Their fresh minds are receptive to new information and are eager to learn from those with more experience.

What's in it for them?

Many students are looking for summer internships to get real-world experience in their field, to bolster their resume for when they graduate, and can even provide short-term exposure to a new location in the country. I'll tell you my story as an example. I came to be in horticulture on a rather meandering path through fields within biology; I attended a small college in Ohio (Wittenberg! Go Tigers!), majored in biology, and had no exposure to land-grant institutions or horticulture. I landed my first internship the summer after my sophomore year in college at the paleobotany lab at the Cleveland Museum of Natural History (Figure 2). I studied fossilized plants; that summer was full of rock saws and working in the lab with an occasional day out in the field where I incidentally found a piece of a [Dunkleosteus](#) in a creek bed on a field day. Did I want to work on prehistoric plants for the rest of my life? *Nope, the plants were too dead.*

The next summer, I interned at the National Museum of Natural History at the Smithsonian in Washington DC. I worked in a molecular botany laboratory, and my project looked at the genetic variability of magnolias in the eastern US. I spent my days extracting DNA and pipetting colorless liquids and my nights and weekends exploring Washington, DC, with other interns in the cohort. Did I want to spend the rest of my days doing molecular work to understand the tree of life? *Nope, the research was too fundamental and abstract.* Now, I was ready to investigate live plants: horticulture! My internships pointed me away from some types of work and to a stimulating career in Extension in floriculture.

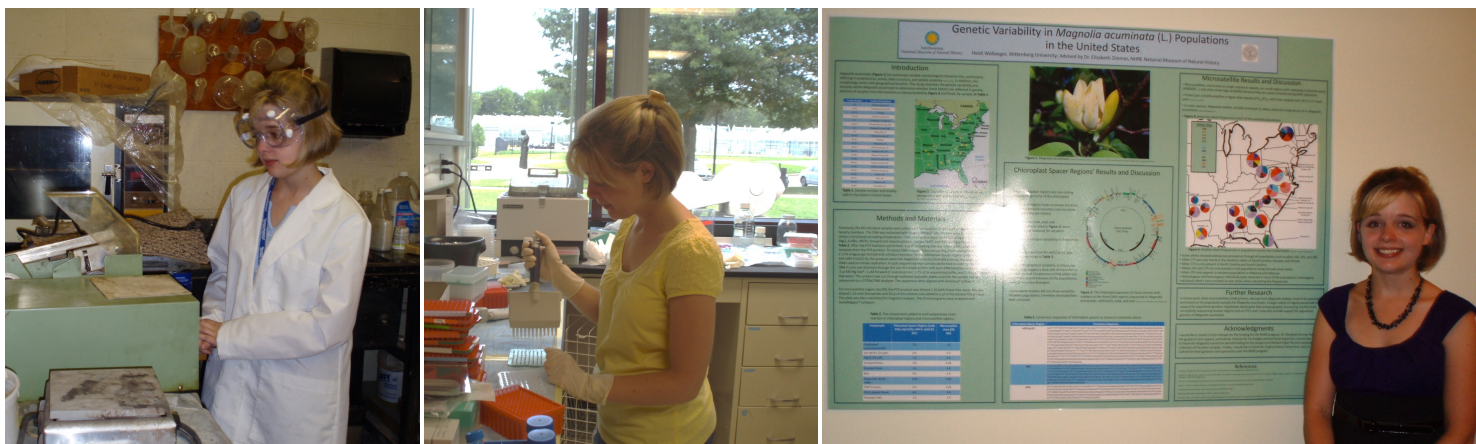


Figure 2. My internships in paleobotany and molecular botany ultimately led me to a career in floriculture Extension.



Figure 3. Many internships in greenhouses provide hands-on experience growing crops through a production cycle. Photo: Bill Winchell, Raker-Roberta's Young Plants.



Figure 4. Scouting is an important skill to teach future growers. Photo: Bill Winchell, Raker-Roberta's Young Plants.

Important Aspects to Consider

One question I get asked regularly is, “Where do I even start in creating an internship program at my business?” Recently, five Michigan greenhouse businesses shared details about their internship programs at the 2022 Greenhouse Growers Expo to help other growers develop a program of their own. Here are the most important considerations for a greenhouse looking to develop a successful internship program.

Variety of Experiences

Providing students with various experiences or special projects transforms just a ‘summer job’ into an ‘internship.’ Many of the greenhouses provided their interns with various experiences: growing plugs (Figure 3), growing finished plants, scouting (Figure 4), using software, merchandising, logistics, visits to contract growers, and marketing (Figure 5). Some businesses chose to have internship ‘tracks’ where they are solely based in the production, business, or marketing departments.

Tailored to Student Interest

As an employer, you should seek to match a work experience with a student’s talents and interests. There is more to growing plants in greenhouse businesses and growers should seek to not only employ horticulture majors, but business, human resource, or marketing majors too. If the internship is the right match for a student, they are more likely to be engaged and invested in their work.

Salary

The salaries at internship programs throughout Michigan greenhouses ranged from \$11 to \$16 an hour. The amount was influenced by location and whether a housing stipend was provided.

Housing

Providing housing is extremely important in attracting interns. Three out of the five greenhouse businesses stated that they provided on-site housing. One business partnered with a local university to use their dorms, while another provided the use of a camper at a nearby campground for a more rustic experience.

Perks

Greenhouse businesses should try to provide their interns with excellent fun and educational experiences. For example, some paid for their interns to go on plant trial tours, to a national show (such as Cultivate), or took them to a local botanical garden. You could also have ‘nights in the garden’ (employee appreciation), pizza nights, or an ice cream social. If you’re a fisherman, you could take your crew for an early morning fishing trip out on a local lake. The sky’s the limit! Show them the sunny side of our industry.

Are you inspired? January and February are the time to develop, finalize, and advertise for summer internships - the best and most ambitious students often apply for internships and have their summer planned months in advance! How should you advertise for your internship? The greenhouse businesses on the panel used the following job websites: Indeed, Michigan State University Horticulture’s

website and student events, American Floral Endowment, their website, [Handshake](#) (recruiting platform for college students), Hortjobs.com, and through word of mouth.

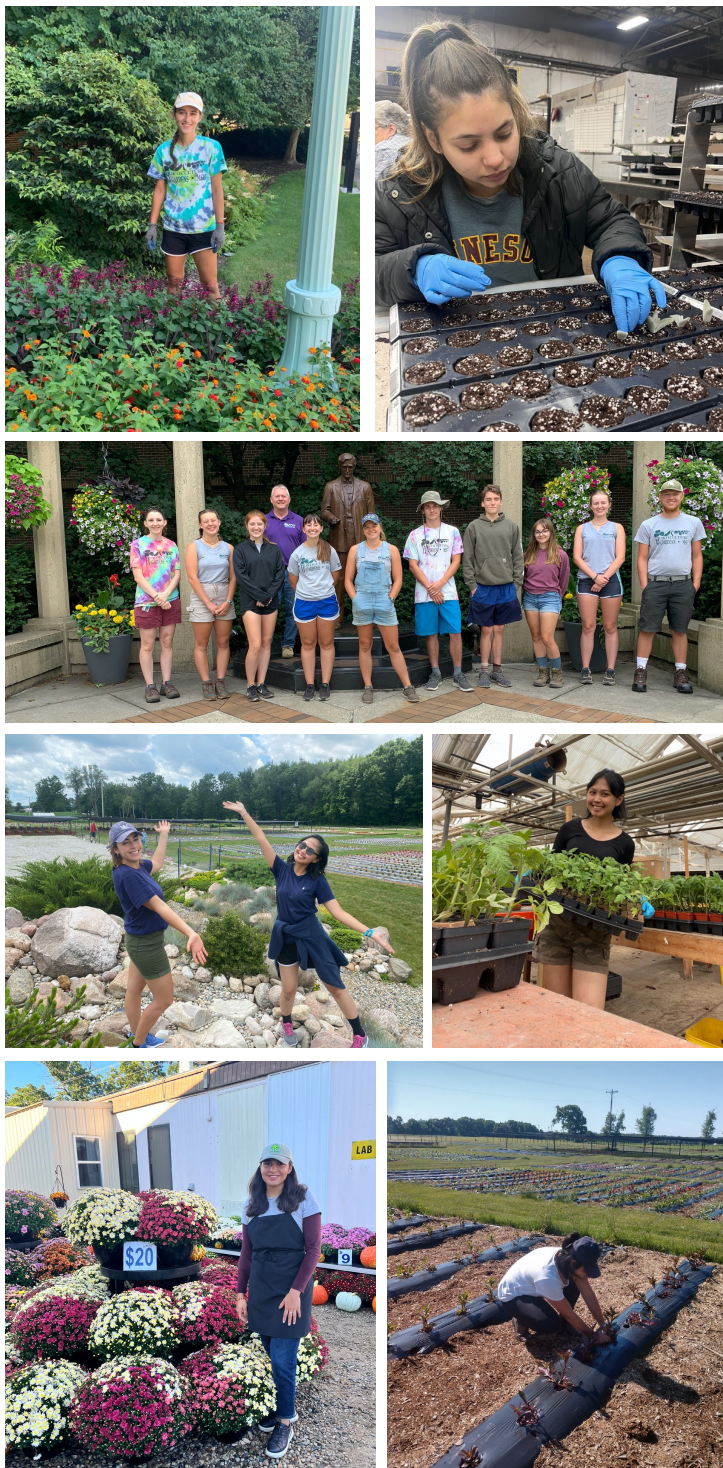


Figure 5. Internships should provide students with a variety of experiences which could include planting, evaluating plants, retail, and shipping. Interns at Raker-Roberta’s Young Plants and MSU Trial Gardens. Photos: Bill Winchell, Raker-Roberta’s Young Plants and Daedre McGrath, MSU Trial Gardens.

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