



# A GROWING PASSION

JAMES ROCKWELL, PRIOR INTERN AT LONGWOOD GARDENS, REFLECTS ON HIS PASSION FOR THE HORTICULTURE FIELD, SOMETHING HE HOPES HE CAN INSTILL IN OTHERS SOME DAY.

**By Lynn Tangorra**

**G**rowing up on a cattle farm in rural Virginia, 2015 GPN/Nexus Intern of the Year, James Rockwell, found himself immersed in the agriculture industry at an early age. “I know that was definitely something I wanted to pursue in my life, but beef cattle production was not what I wanted to do as a career,” says Rockwell. Instead he found himself taking his first horticulture course his sophomore year of high school. He had the opportunity to work in a greenhouse and enjoyed the experience so much that the following year he took a production course.

“I found that I really just couldn’t get enough of it,” Rockwell says. “At Virginia Tech I pursued a horticulture degree and through that have gotten even more greenhouse experience. I found I really enjoy that.”

After completing high school, Rockwell had no problem deciding where he wanted to attend college saying, “I always wanted to go to Virginia Tech. When you think of agriculture in Virginia, Virginia Tech is absolutely the college that I thought of. I didn’t apply anywhere else.”

He found a good fit there, double majoring in Environmental Horticulture and Agribusiness. When he is not attending classes, Rockwell is involved in the Horticulture Club, the horticulture honors society Pi Alpha Xi and works three jobs (as a teaching assistant, office assistant for the department of horticulture and as an undergraduate research assistant) all while maintaining a 3.7 GPA.

“It can be a lot sometimes, but I am really involved with things I enjoy,” he says. “I have learned to focus on school first and then have all of these activities beyond that.”

Rockwell recalls that so far at Virginia Tech his favorite course has been the Ornamental Plant Production and Marketing Course that he took with Dr. Holly Scoggins. “That was the best experience that I have had here at Virginia Tech,” he says. “It kind of shaped my career path a little bit because I hadn’t worked in a greenhouse prior to that class and I was able to go from plants coming in all the way to the end of their production and sale. It was a really good experience.”



Dr. Scoggins fondly remembers having Rockwell in class. “He just had enthusiasm for everything that we would be doing,” she says. “That constant positive reinforcement of everything that I would be trying to teach is really great feedback for a professor and instructor. His ‘can do’ and ‘lets get to it’ attitude really energized the students around him.”

### Planting a Way

His hard work and determination is what landed him a prestigious internship at Longwood Gardens in Pennsylvania, in 2014, the summer after his junior year. The opportunity was something Rockwell says he always had in the back of his mind. He first stepped foot at Longwood Gardens as a freshman in high school, when he learned about the different internship opportunities offered at the gardens.

“It seemed like a really distant goal that I could maybe one day pursue. Then I went to college; it was always in the back of my mind.” In the fall of 2013, Rockwell went on a department trip to some gardens in Virginia, eventually traveling up through



*(above) Having visited Longwood Gardens his freshman year in high school, James Rockwell returned the summer after his junior year in college to complete a prestigious internship. (left) Set to graduate from Virginia Tech in May, Rockwell hopes to one day have a career in public horticulture.*

New York and stopping at Longwood Gardens.

“It was kind of another reminder that I might want to apply for [the internship],” recalls Rockwell. “I did some research the beginning of my spring semester and applied. I had my interview and Dr. Brian Trader called me to offer me the position.”

Longwood Gardens is one of the largest public gardens in the nation. Sixty percent of the plants that go into the gardens are produced via its own greenhouses. Rockwell says his internship was in greenhouse production because that’s where his real interest was.

On a typical day, his main duty was to support the four main growers who worked in the lower production houses. “Every day I would go in and do whatever was needed for the growers,” he says. This could include: watering, pinching and taking cuttings. “The really unique thing about those tasks was the huge variety of plants that I

would get to work with,” Rockwell says.

This internship provided the opportunity to work with a plethora of plants on a daily basis, something that proposed a bit of a challenge on some occasions. “One of the most challenging things was that we would work with different plants everyday,” Rockwell recalls. “It was really rewarding to get to learn about all these different plant types, but it also was a learning curve whenever something new would come up to know how to properly propagate it and to know how it was handled.”

He remembers one plant in particular that seemed to be more stressful to care for than others. “The plants that were some of the more stressful plants [to work with] were the poinsettias that go on display at Christmas time,” he says. “People look forward to [the display] all year long and if anything were to happen to those [plants], Longwood couldn’t just buy new ones. It was a lot of pressure.”

## Seeds of Knowledge

Rockwell felt that throughout his three-month internship experience, there was never a lull in learning new skills and facts about horticulture.

“In production I really feel like my advisor, Nancy Kane, was a big advocate for education,” he explains. “Every week we would have a field trip

through the education department where we would stay at Longwood Gardens and learn something, or we would go to different gardens.”

Rockwell also explains that the production team was just as dedicated to educating students as his advisor was, and felt like he did something new everyday while having these other opportunities to

supplement what he was learning.

That thirst for learning was one thing Kane says she found unique about Rockwell. “One thing that really struck me about James was that he had been awarded a scholarship to attend the Perennial Plant Association Symposium for a week during his internship,” Kane recalls. “He really struggled with the fact that he was going to miss a week of learning in order to go. There was a tremendous opportunity at the Symposium, but he knew that there were opportunities here as well. And he didn’t want to miss that.”

His passion for learning was one of the many reasons Kane chose Rockwell for this internship. “His personality kind of showed through his application,” Kane recalls. “The passion for horticulture is what really came through. He is a leader, and it was really interesting to watch him with the other interns and see how he kind of pulled them all together.”

Another component of Rockwell’s internship was working in the fruit houses, which are open to the public. “Sometimes [I would have the opportunity] to work and maintain those displays so that they would be of good standard for the public to come through and view them,” he explains. “I would get to interact with guests through that opportunity.”

Working in the fruit houses gave Rockwell the opportunity to pursue something else he loves, interacting with the public. “At Longwood I had the opportunity to share horticulture with the public,” he says. “Whether it was working in the display houses, or even walking around the gardens helping answer questions about plants, interacting with people is something I am passionate about.”

## Passion, Plants and People

Rockwell hopes to one day have a career in public horticulture, something that can come in many different forms. “I loved what I did at Longwood where I was producing plants and working with the public,” he remarks. “That is definitely a career path I want to pursue. I want to be doing plant production, which I am really passionate about, but I also want to pursue my passion for people. I learned that those two things combined can make me really happy.”

Rockwell is also interested in community outreach in horticulture and wants to find a career where he is not only producing plants, but also



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sharing knowledge with the public and engaging and getting them excited about this industry. “It is an important industry that some people have gotten away from a little bit,” he says. “It was nice to see that Longwood Gardens is doing a really good job of sharing [horticulture] with people.”

With a graduation date of May 2015, Rockwell

is hoping to take a year to work in the horticulture field before pursuing any advanced education. “I want to take the next year to do a program somewhere immersed in horticulture,” he says. “After that I plan on going to grad school to get a master’s degree in horticulture and go on to do something in a public garden.”

Rockwell feels that many do not have the opportunity to understand the real beauty behind a field like horticulture. While more recently there has been a growing interest in plant production, Rockwell feels it could be larger.

“I think that something that is kind of unique about horticulture is that it’s a very science-based industry growing plants, but then there is so much art behind it too,” he explains. “To grow great plants you have to understand the science behind the production, but then the end product is really beautifying our world. I don’t think people realize that you do have the science focus, but then at the end you need so much creativity and an artistic viewpoint to really carry that to the end. It really utilizes a lot of different skills and it’s a lot of fun.” 

**Lynn Tangorra is assistant editor with GPN magazine. For more information about the GPN/Nexus Intern of the Year, please contact Tim Hodson, editorial director, at [thodson@sgcmail.com](mailto:thodson@sgcmail.com).**

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Sweet Sixteen! When we first started the GPN/Nexus Intern Award, our intention was that it would be an annual award, but how quickly we have seen sixteen award winners and their accomplishments parade before us.

We are fortunate that many companies in our industry have elected to have internship programs each year, including the one at Nexus. It gives college students a chance to see the everyday real situations that make our industry hum, while allowing them to make changes in their careers at a crucial point.

The famed UCLA basketball coach, John Wooden, said, “Don’t mistake activity with achievements.” That came to mind when I read the nomination of James Rockwell. He did not just show up for work, he excelled in college and his internship. We are proud that James will represent the accomplishments of all of the interns in our industry this year.

— Cheryl J. Longtin, CEO, Nexus Corporation