

# A NEED TO SUCCEED

*There are no shades of gray for Gray Simpson, the 2017 GPN/Nexus Intern of the Year, when it comes to pursuing a career in horticulture.*

BY ANA OLVERA

**G**ray Simpson had one overall goal when he began his path in horticulture at the University of Georgia (UGA): Gain enough hands-on experience to be prepared for a rewarding career.

With a six-month internship, a term as vice president of the UGA Hort Club, a part-time job at the UGA Trial Gardens and the award of 2017 GPN/Nexus Intern of the Year, Simpson seems to have achieved his goal.

“It’s just my personality; I’ve always sort of been a perfectionist,” Simpson says. “I just tried to do my best at whatever is on the table. Obviously if you do a good job, it’s better for your future career. You do a good job, you get good results.”

That drive to reach his goal led Simpson to Metrolina Greenhouses.

“When I heard about the opportunity to take a break from school and spend six months interning full time at a cutting-edge commercial greenhouse, I had to apply,” Simpson says.

He completed a six-month internship at Metrolina Greenhouses’ main facility in Huntersville, North Carolina. From January to June 2016, he learned the ins and outs of Metrolina’s production and research and development departments.

## FROM PRODUCTION TO MARKETING

Simpson’s duties as assistant grower included managing irrigation, drenching and IPM scouting. By the end of February, he was working every third weekend, “which meant being confident in making decisions independently and carrying them out efficiently.”

Simpson says his leadership style was influenced by Metrolina grower Greg Ragan.

“Working with Greg made me realize just how much it takes to be an excellent grower,” says Simpson. “He gave me free reign



to plan my day and make my own decisions — and occasionally my own mistakes — but he always kept an eye out and checked up on me throughout the day. Every decision he made was unwavering, yet he always explained his reasoning.”

For the last month of his internship Simpson transitioned to the research and development department at Metrolina, where he says he witnessed different styles of management.

“The whole production process is different when you’re doing something for research,” Simpson says. “Being in a research setting, it’s quite a bit different.”

Simpson even assisted the marketing department with setting up a mock garden center for an open house at Metrolina’s public trial gardens.

“I feel like I did a really great job at [Metrolina] and it’s a real confidence boost,” he says. “It really showed me what it’s like

**Gray Simpson’s internship experience at Metrolina Greenhouses helped him develop his production and management skills.**

# Growing the Industry's Future

Internships like Gray Simpson's at Metrolina can help the industry further grow and expand.

"Working in an industry like ours is a very special privilege and responsibility. If we want to work together to grow flowers, foliage and vegetables that are more healthy, beautiful and profitable, we need highly talented people to grow them," says Craig Humphrey, vice president of engineering for Nexus Corporation.

"I am so proud of the Nexus family for having joined with GPN 17 years ago to provide this scholarship and recognition for a deserving intern. If in some small way, this brings more qualified students to become growers, then we have succeeded in our goal."

"I have been honored to meet a number of the past honored interns and have seen their enthusiasm first-hand. It is such a thrill to visit one of our customers and have someone come up and introduce themselves as one of the past winners or applicants for Intern of the Year," Humphrey adds. "All of their photos hang on the walls of our headquarters. Never a day goes by that I do not see the face of one of them as I walk into my office."

*For information on the 2018 GPN/Nexus Intern of the Year, please contact Tim Hodson at [thodson@greatamericanpublish.com](mailto:thodson@greatamericanpublish.com).*



on the ground when you're doing it day in and day out. I surprised myself with how quickly I learned to manage my time, communicate effectively and make independent decisions."

## BACK TO SCHOOL

After honing his leadership and management skills at Metrolina and returning to UGA, Simpson became the vice president of the university's Hort Club and the coordinator for the club's annual plant sale.

"I followed Greg's example by giving people the freedom to make decisions on their own," Simpson says. "Whenever anyone made a mistake, I would show everyone and gently explain what went wrong, so that we all learned something in the end."

The UGA Hort Club exceeded its goal in gross sales and was the smoothest event in years, says Simpson's advisor and professor of floriculture Paul Thomas.

"It's good to see someone come back with those types of people management skills," Thomas says. "Those types of skills are wonderful to have at a young age. Gray literally threw himself into that project and he got contracts, he got sales."

To put it simply, Thomas says, "Gray gets it."

"Gray shows leadership, personal responsibility, work ethic and can-do attitude," Thomas says.

For example, take an act of responsibility Thomas witnessed. On the Saturday morning after the Hort Club plant sale, Thomas saw Simpson



**KNOWLEDGE**  
**PERSONAL ATTENTION**  
**SUPPORT**  
**DEEP SATISFACTION**  
*all* **STANDARD**





Metrolina Greenhouses has more than 160 acres of greenhouses which gave Gray Simpson ample opportunity to learn about large scale greenhouse production.

loading up his own car at 7 a.m. with unsold plants that needed to be returned to consignment partners and the university's greenhouses. Despite being midterm exam week, "he did not shirk the obligations," Thomas says. "He just got up early and got the job done."

"I thought that internship had a very profound impact on him. He returned from Metrolina more aware of the value of time, the sensitivity of deadlines and the obligation and value of one's promises," Thomas says.

**EXPLORING OPTIONS**

Reflecting on his internship, Thomas encourages other students to talk with their advisor and explore available internship programs.

"Make it a top priority to broaden your horizons with an internship that

interests and challenges you," Simpson says. "Take Spring semester off, and I can guarantee you'll learn a thing or two about what "Spring" means to greenhouse folk!"

As he approaches the end of his final year at UGA, Simpson says he hopes to start his career in the production department at a major greenhouse corporation.

"My goal is to work my way up at company with a good culture — that's growing and promoting people," he says. "And ethical within the industry and active in the industry."

For now Simpson is preparing for a summer internship at a UGA satellite campus in Costa Rica. His focus while there will be on learning Spanish and studying sustainable agriculture on the campus' research farm. [gpn](http://gpn.org)



Pleasant View

GROWING SUCCESS

