

# Covering All Bases



*Jessica Yaeger's comprehensive internship experience at Illinois-based Midwest Groundcovers provided her with insight into the horticulture industry and her professional future.*

**BY TIM HODSON**

Ever since she was young and would spend time with her father in the greenhouse, Jessica Yaeger, the 2019 GPN/Nexus Intern of the Year, knew she wanted to study plants.

"Since I was a little girl, I have always loved flowers. I really loved the different colors and the different combinations that you can create with different varieties," she says.

It really helped that she grew up on a family farm in northern Illinois that also had three greenhouses and a farm market.

At Yaeger's Farm Market, owned and operated by her father, Mark, there are greenhouses that produce a wide range of annuals, perennials and potted plants. The farm also has 20 acres of fruit and vegetable growing throughout the seasons along with a retail farm market.

With agriculture and horticulture so prominent in her family tree, she seemed destined to pursue a career growing plants and vegetables.

## **FROM THE PRAIRIE TO HAPPY VALLEY AND BACK (FOR THE SUMMER)**

Two years ago, when it came time for Jessica to look at colleges, she knew she wanted to explore her options outside of the Midwest. This led her to Penn State University in State College, Pennsylvania, where she is pursuing her undergraduate degree in plant science with a focus on horticulture.

After her freshman year at PSU, Jessica began looking at different internship opportunities and discovered that Midwest Groundcovers, headquartered in St. Charles, Illinois, had intern positions available in their facilities near her hometown.

When she interviewed for one of the eight internship positions, Jessica was impressed with the diversity that the company offered in its products as well as the different educational options she might have.

After the interview process, she was selected to be the 2018 summer greenhouse intern at the company's Virgil, Illinois, location.

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“Going into the internship I had two main goals: to learn how to operate the machinery and technology around the nursery, and to have opportunities and gain hands-on experience in the horticulture industry,” Jessica states.

And that is exactly what happened over the next 10 weeks.

**HITTING THE GROUND RUNNING**

Jessica returned to Illinois in the middle of May and joined Midwest Groundcovers, just in time for the height of spring sales of the company’s Bud & Bloom program.

“It was incredibly humbling to see how much planning and effort goes into the behind-the-scenes work of the plant that consumers buy at garden centers,” she says.

As soon as she arrived in Virgil, she had to learn how the company’s spring ordering process operated, as well as things like how to identify the different products, quality assurance procedures, and the tagging, packing and shipping processes.

Once the spring season began to slow down, her next responsibilities included transitioning the greenhouses for the next crops and preparing for the fall season.

“I learned how to prune plants to encourage new growth and how to cut back plants for overwintering. I also sowed seeds for the fall crop and helped consolidate the remaining plants to create space for the fall varieties,” Jessica remarks.

One of the new tasks she learned was how to take soil samples. “Every Monday I was given a list of plants to go around and collect soil from and then measure their electrical conductivity (EC) and pH. My supervisor taught me how to take the readings and also explained what I was looking for in each test,” she recalls.

# Midwest Groundcovers' *Virgil Production Nursery*

The Virgil Nursery is the company's newest production facility. It has five growing areas that operate as a self-sufficient production unit complete with its own loading dock, storage facilities, work/break areas and offices. Each growing area is a “mini nursery” within a bigger nursery.

**Number of units produced:**  
2.3 million units annually  
**Acres:** 262  
**Products:** Bud & Bloom annuals, herbs, edibles, tropicals, deciduous shrubs, roses, small trees, roses, conifers, broadleaf evergreens and the company's Fall Collection



Midwest Groundcovers' diverse product offering provided Jessica Yeager with many different hands-on learning opportunities during her internship.

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**Midwest Groundcovers' Virgil facility produces and ships approximately 2.3 million units annually.**

This on-the-job training was something she really appreciated. "I had not had the opportunity to do EC and pH readings before, so I really enjoyed learning what information each test gives about the soil and fertilizer."

Jessica and the other interns also were tasked with designing and constructing the landscape for the company's front flower bed. They were able to pick and choose shrubs from anywhere in the nursery. This was also a new challenge for Jessica as she learned about landscape design and proper plant selection for the landscape.

"It was a great experience being able to bond with the other interns and learn how to blend our skills together to work cohesively and implement our design," she says.

### **HANDS-ON WITH THE TECHNOLOGY**

As the summer progressed, Jessica's goal of learning about new greenhouse technology became a reality as management at Midwest

Groundcovers assigned more responsibilities and independence to the interns.

One of those responsibilities was overseeing the automated irrigation system for the entire greenhouse over the weekend when no one else was around. Jessica had to learn how the company's automatic watering systems were programmed for different crops, monitor their progress and how to troubleshoot them if something went wrong.

During those weekends when no one else was working, she got to explore the nursery and soak up all aspects of what Midwest Groundcovers produces and really appreciate what the industry is all about.

"You really realize, in those quiet moments when no one else is around, how much you enjoy just being there with the plants," she says.

As mum season approached, Jessica was also given the chance to experiment with a potting machine — something else she had never done. She teamed up with another intern

## **An Amazing 20 Years — and an Amazing 20 Interns**

### **Twenty years and 20 Intern of the Year Awards!**

Over the past 20 years, we have been amazed at the talent that we have been witness to. It is such a pleasure to be at Cultivate and have some of the past winners come by the Nexus booth to say hello and to see their pride in having been the GPN/Nexus Award scholarship winner. We look forward to what the next 20 years will bring and how our industry will change.

We are proud of this award. It combines so many things that Nexus stands for. Excellence and being the best defines our responsibility to the industry, just as this award does. We enjoy recognizing a student who stands out and to, in some way, help our growers with a pool of talented young graduates.

One of our employees has a sign on the office wall with a quote from the legendary Vince Lombardi that says: "The quality of a person's life is in direct proportion to excellence, regardless of their chosen field of endeavor."

This year's Intern of the Year is Jessica Yaeger, a sophomore at Penn State University who did her internship at Midwest Groundcovers in Virgil, Illinois, last summer. Jessica's essay, her letters of recommendation and her subsequent scholarship attests to her excellence. No matter where her career takes her, she will have an excellent quality of life.

Nexus and our industry salute Jessica and her commitment to her career in horticulture. I know that she will leave her mark wherever she goes.

— **Craig Humphrey, Nexus Corp.**



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Jessica Yaeger and fellow intern, Josh Pepping, in front of the landscape bed designed and built by Midwest Groundcovers' team of interns.

to figure out how to use the machine and optimize its performance so it could be used for planting gallon containers, 10-inch hanging baskets and half-bushel baskets.

"Once we had all of the factors figured out and the assembly line process was running smoothly, the results were astonishing," she says — from 140 plants per hour planted by hand to 400 per hour with the potting machine.

### IT'S NOT JUST PLANT CULTURE

Not only did Jessica enjoy working with all of the different plants that Midwest Groundcovers grows, but also realized that she loved working with all of the people at the company.

"The thing I really enjoyed the most was actually getting to know my co-workers and learning how to communicate and relate to them,"

The workforce at the Virgil facility is very diverse including Hispanic workers, refugees from the Congo and adult workers with developmental disabilities.

"Over the 10 weeks, we learned how to communicate and work together. I really enjoyed that. Getting to work with so many different people with

such different backgrounds and cultures was very rewarding. I looked forward every day going to work with the team."

She said the company's monthly meetings would be conducted in English, Spanish and Swahili. "We'd get together and the meeting would start with 'Hello! Hola! and Hujambo!'"

### MANAGEMENT WITH A VISION

During her internship, Jessica and the other interns also had a chance to meet with supervisors, senior management and the owners of Midwest Groundcovers for three different "Pub Vision" sessions.

During these sessions, they would get together for dinner and conversation to pick each other's brains to help expand their education and to also improve the company.

Jessica says owner Christa Orum-Keller, along with the rest of the management team, "really valued what we had to say. She would listen to what the interns said at these meetings and take everything into account and then take action when it was needed.

"That was amazing to just sit down and have those conversations with the people that can make a difference and make changes happen."

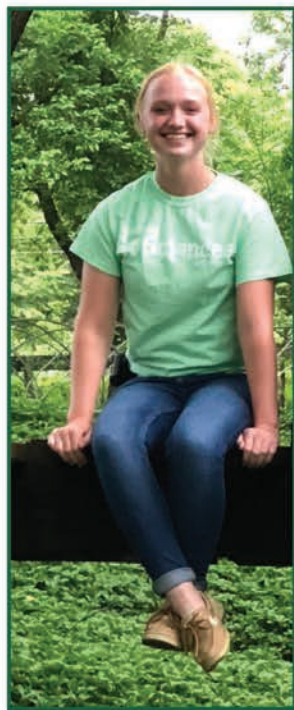
### WHAT'S NEXT?

Jessica is currently a sophomore at Penn State. She is keeping all of her career options open, including joining the family business in Illinois once she finishes her education.

"I know that whatever I end up doing, I want to have a job where I am doing something different every day — whether it is working with different plants one day and then vegetables the next. I want to be doing something that is always keeping me on my toes," Jessica declares.

"And that's one of the nice things about this industry — it is always changing!" **gpn**

## CONGRATULATIONS JESSICA YAEGER ON BEING NAMED GPN/NEXUS INTERN OF THE YEAR!



The Midwest Companies are very proud of our interns and the program we have cultivated. Our goal is to provide a multi-faceted and meaningful opportunity for the student to experience day-to-day operations.

### INTERNS WILL ENJOY:

- Educational and social events
- In-house training
- Networking
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