

Growth

BY EXPERIENCE

Caleb Spall's experiences at Michigan State University and internship with Green Circle Growers give insight into management and operations — and a glimpse at his professional future.

BY JOE TACOSIK

Growing up, Caleb Spall, the 2020 GPN/Nexus Intern of the Year, had virtually no exposure to horticulture — his parents both went to school for art, and all of his siblings were interested in either the arts or English. Nevertheless, volunteering at a local organic farm in the summers while growing up is what lit Spall's spark of passion for horticulture.

"I'm obviously not super into farming now, but it got me thinking about plants," Spall says of the experiences as a young boy. "From there, I started participating in science fairs and doing experiments with plants."

Spall's first experiment came when he was in the 6th grade, when he worked on a hydroponic houseplant setup. "That was what really got me interested in controlled environment growing," Spall said.

A CHANGE IN DIRECTION

The career path for Spall, however, wasn't always on the horticultural track. Throughout high school, he joined a biomedical science program with the intentions of being a cardiologist. But following his senior year, when looking at colleges and careers, Spall felt his passion was more in horticulture than cardiology.

With an eye on college, Spall had visited his sister, who was studying English at Michigan State University, numerous times — and knew it was exactly where he wanted to be.

"(Michigan State University) was really the only school I applied to," Spall says. "I'd been there many times and always knew it was where I wanted to go — and I knew that their horticulture program was, in my opinion, the best in the Midwest."

FINDING FLORICULTURE

At most universities, specifically Michigan State University, there are many paths students can choose. In horticulture, especially, there are specializations within the program such as sustainable and organic horticulture, landscape design, horticultural science and more. Spall says in trying to find his desired path, he did a lot of "bouncing around" throughout his freshman year.

"It was sensory overload at the time — I was working on an organic farm for a time, working on a hydroponic herb initiative out of one of the



dorms where we grew basil and sold it to the cafeterias," Spall says. "I jumped around all these sectors my freshman year, trying to get some information in each one and really figure out what I wanted to do."

Finally, Spall says, it was a course in greenhouse structures and management taught by Roberto Lopez that helped him find his way into floriculture — and, in turn, an internship at Green Circle Growers in Oberlin, Ohio.

"It was in the greenhouse structures and management course that I realized that floriculture was the complete intersection of what I love — plants, controlled environment growing, and applied science and automation," Spall says. "It combined the passion I had for the hard sciences with plants."

Lopez's course, Spall says, opened the door for many opportunities — including a chance to work alongside Lopez as a lab assistant and lead researcher on several research studies, as well as within the school's student horticulture association and help with potential internship opportunities.

WHY GREEN CIRCLE GROWERS?

When it came time to select an internship for his learning experience, Spall says he was applying to a lot of different places — but it was Lopez's recommendation that he look into Green Circle Growers as a potential internship opportunity.

"By the time I was applying, it was as I was really getting into floriculture," Spall says. "I was really into orchids, and was asking



faculty and professors about potential internships, when Dr. Lopez suggested I look into Green Circle after asking about commercial orchid operations in the area.”

With more than 100 acres of indoor growing space, Green Circle Growers is one of the largest greenhouses in North America — something Spall says attracted him to the internship in the first place.

“Green Circle was my first choice, and I was thrilled when I heard back,” Spall adds. “I’ve been to so many greenhouse operations for work and class trips — I’ve never seen something as large as Green Circle’s campus.”

LEARNING THROUGH EXPERIENCE

Within Spall’s first month on campus at MSU, he founded the school’s first student-run hydroponic initiative, involving the hydroponic culture of herbs and their subsequent sale to MSU dining halls. In 2018, he was elected as the head grower of Michigan State’s Student Horticulture Association (SHA) — something he says not only helped his understanding of

greenhouse operations going into his internship, but also helped give him some background to look for things such as diseases and issues with plants.

“Last year, we grew annuals, perennials, house plants — stuff like that. That sort of helped me understand floriculture a little better,” Spall says. “I didn’t have too much experience before going to Green Circle, so it helped give me that background... understanding how to grow high quality crops, etc.”

A Plant With Healthy Roots

All of the interns who applied for the GPN/Nexus Intern of the Year scholarship are the epitome of healthy, beautiful plants. Each of them in their essays described their journeys through a love of growing things, to a successful education and finally to their chosen career plan. They are all plants with healthy roots.

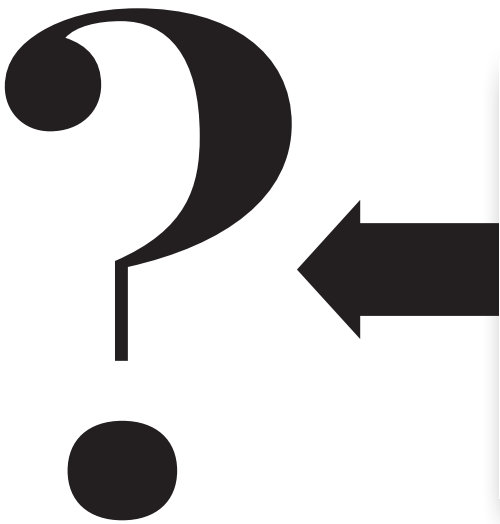
Over 20 years ago we talked about how Nexus could help our industry and customers achieve their goals. We talked about new products that we were designing and consumer trends as well as roadblocks to success.

Our growers had a recurring need for talented staff and it seemed there were fewer young people attracted to our industry. What could we do? Along with GPN, our combined teams set up a plan to shine a light on the value of an education and career in horticulture. The Intern of the Year scholarship was our way of making it happen. We are proud of the result.

Our 21st intern, Caleb Spall, is someone we can all be proud of. While doing his internship at Green Circle Growers, he left a legacy of accomplishments. Caleb sees how he wants to spend his career and has decided to pursue a master’s degree in floriculture next year. This scholarship will aid him in that pursuit.

As a whole generation of interns make their mark, the Nexus staff recognizes them. We see their names on industry articles, we support them as they conduct webinars, and we run into them when we visit our longtime customers. Caleb will be one of those making a mark. We are proud of all of our interns. At Nexus, we know that what we stand for, defines who we are and how our industry can be shaped for the future by these outstanding individuals.

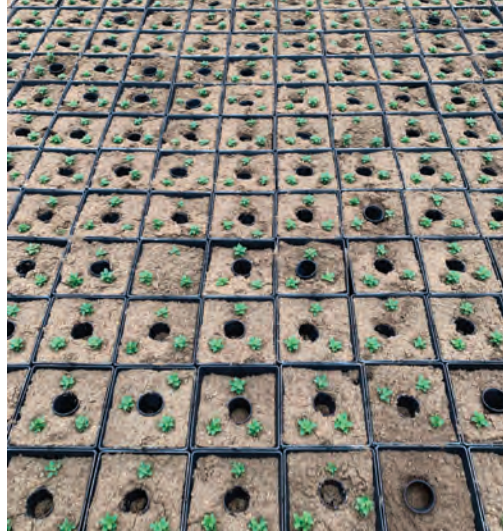
— Craig Humphrey, Nexus Corp.



LESS OF
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MORE OF
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Spall says his position with the SHA provided opportunities to innovate in the greenhouses to improve crop yield and quality, as well as his understanding of commercial growing. More recently, the SHA is working in experimenting with sub irrigation methods, and are working to implement new IPM protocols to improve the production of crops for the school's spring plant sale.

"By aiding in Dr. Roberto Lopez's research efforts, I am able to focus on floriculture while simultaneously helping to provide the industry with advanced knowledge regarding the benefits of horticultural light-emitting diode (LED) technology," Spall adds.

Going into his internship, Spall believed he would just be learning about growing plants and the care and processes behind it. But after requesting to work with upper management on some of the more day-to-day tasks, Spall says working with Danny Missler, grower manager at Green Circle, on some of the processes and behind-the-scenes operational things are where he learned the most.

"They really showed me — by attending manager meetings, going through task lists, etc. — that there's so much else that goes into (operating a greenhouse)," Spall says. "Coming into the internship, I wasn't expecting to have that exposure."

It was seeing how all the different pieces of the puzzle work together, Spall says, that really helped him understand what it means to work in floriculture and the effort behind it — learning to rely on others, how to be a good collaborator, and learning the ins and outs of the different growing practices themselves.

"I really saw how these different sectors work together to attain the material, establish it, distribute it and sell it," Spall says. "I learned so much about the entire process itself, rather than just the growing."

LOOKING FORWARD

Spall would like to continue his work in the research and development side of the industry, including helping organizations implement more sustainable practices and innovating the reduced use of chemicals throughout the growing process — something he was able to help with during his internship.

"As I was there, I brainstormed a lot of different ways to use less chemicals," Spall says. "Green Circle gave me the scope of what the current industry is, and inspired me to brainstorm and think about how, in the future, growing techniques can be changed. It prompted me to think about the future of floriculture."

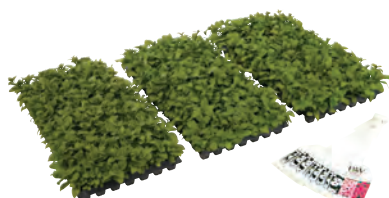
Caleb Spall is currently a senior at Michigan State University. After he graduates, he plans to travel to the Netherlands to pursue his master's degree in plant sciences with a specialization in greenhouse horticulture at Wageningen University.

"My time at MSU has really changed my outlook on horticulture... it's impacted my life tremendously," Spall says. "As far as my internship — it was an amazing experience. There's no question, after my experience at Green Circle, I felt so welcome in the industry. I'm very excited to continue to pursue my education in the field." **gpn**



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