



# A Well-Rounded EXPERIENCE

*Cole Bieker's internship at Green Circle Growers provided him with a multifaceted education that will last a lifetime. It also earned him the distinction of the 2022 GPN/Prospiant Intern of the Year.*

**BY TIM HODSON**

**I**nternships are designed to expand a college student's education and provide them with real-world experience.

It's also an opportunity for a student to make connections with people, processes and companies that could have a major impact on their upcoming careers — while they are still in school.

That's what happened to Cole Bieker, a horticulture student at Kansas State University, when he participated in the internship program at Green Circle Growers in Oberlin, Ohio, in the spring of 2021.

His experience at Green Circle exposed him to so many different aspects of the horticulture industry that "it really did feel like I got to experience multiple internships squeezed into four months," he says. "At first it was intimidating but it was also exciting. Sometimes it seemed like I was working at four different companies because every day was so different in each area."

As a result of those experiences, Cole has been named the 2022 GPN/Prospiant Intern of the Year (formerly the GPN/Nexus Intern of the Year.)

## THE ADVENTURE BEGINS

Cole is currently a senior at KSU and plans to graduate in December. Due to COVID-19, Cole opted to do a spring internship rather than a summer internship in 2021. "That turned out to be a really good decision because I felt like I really got to see a lot more as they went from the winter season into the busy spring season," he says.

Students participating in internship programs over the past two years have faced a multitude of challenges thanks to the pandemic. After being locked down with family and friends in Kansas, adapting to a new environment in a new state took a little getting used to for Cole when he moved to Ohio, but it also gave him a chance to focus on learning about horticulture and himself.

Before he left Kansas for Ohio, Cole developed a set of goals that he wanted to focus on during his time at Green Circle. The goals were divided into three distinct categories — technical aspects/production skills, business organization and communication.

"When looking at the communication goals, my focus was primarily on building relationships with coworkers, seeing new perspectives on the industry and working on my own social skills in a work setting," Cole says.

"I wanted to work on connecting with the people I was meeting and really get to know the growers I was working with ... I put some extra intentional energy into that."

## THE INTERNSHIP

Cole says the Green Circle internship program is focused on giving students a well-rounded experience and he really appreciated that. During his

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16-week internship, he spent four weeks at four different facilities learning how and why Green Circle does what it does.

“Because each facility is so unique in its crop and processes, I was exposed to a variety of new growing perspectives and horticultural experiences,” he remarks.

He started his rotation in Plant 1, Green Circle Growers’ oldest facility. Since it was still January, the pace was a little slower; this allowed him the chance to ease into a new job and a new location. He worked with two different growers “getting acquainted with backpack sprayers, watering and edging, weekly tasks like push tests and pest cards and learning the structure of the company.”

His next assignment was in Plant 6 that focused on plug production, where “I got a lot of experience applying PGRs, scouting for pests and maintaining a clean workspace.”

Cole enjoyed the fast-paced environment in Plant 6. “There was a lot to get done each day,” he says, so it always kept him on his toes. Unlike the other three locations where he moved around a lot, “I stayed in one section in Plant 6 for the entirety of the rotation, which was helpful in seeing what a ‘typical’ month looks like for an employee. There was so much movement of the plugs and I saw new plants every day.”

During his next rotation, Cole was assigned to Plant 4, Green Circle Growers’ orchid range, where the company’s signature orchid brand, Just Add Ice orchids, is grown. Just Add Ice orchids are sold at retail locations across the country. According to the company’s website, “Green Circle Growers has 33 acres of dedicated orchid production, making it the largest orchid producer in North America. Just Add Ice orchids are grown in an environmentally friendly fashion, using highly efficient growing techniques, water conservation and a sustainable heat source.”

During this rotation, Cole gained experience with the company’s

## CONTENDING WITH COVID

Participating in an internship program during a pandemic can create a few challenges. Just ask Joy Johnson, the 2020 Intern of the Year. The COVID-19 crisis forced many growers and universities to cancel their internship plans for 2020.

Cole Bieker didn’t have to contend with as many challenges as Joy did, but COVID was still a threat when he began his internship in January 2021.

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Priva environmental control system. Cole says he was fascinated by the technology and how precisely the greenhouse environment could be controlled to produce the orchids.

In Plant 4, the growing team focused on sustainability when it came to overall crop production and protection. “It was clear that Green Circle has orchid growing down to a science,” he remarks.

The final stop of Cole’s 16-week internship was in Plant 2, where “I received an in-depth look at how growers approach their main and complex task of growing, including chemical use and being mindful of sustainability.”

He says it was the perfect place to finish off his time at Green Circle. The last four weeks allowed him to revisit most of the skills he had learned and



According to Cole, management at Green Circle Growers was very proactive in protecting employees from the coronavirus. "They did a really good job keeping everyone safe," he says.

All employees were required to wear masks, sanitizing stations were available and, whenever possible, social distance.

And health care professionals even came to Green Circle Growers to administer the vaccines to employees so Cole was able to receive both doses of his COVID-19 vaccines during his internship.

*Bring them on.*



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practiced in the previous locations in the previous 12 weeks and "I was able to see the progress I had made, as well as assess what sort of a career I may possibly pursue in the future."

In Plant 2, he had a chance to learn the intricacies of greenhouse space utilization, different growing strategies for specific crops and communicate with other growers

to learn more about how they do their jobs. "Plant 2 seemed to have aspects of all three of my previous rotations, so I reflected a great deal on my entire experience during this time."

#### AN INQUIRING MIND

As Cole made his rotations through Green Circle Growers' operations, he took the opportunity

to ask a lot of questions and take advantage of the growing staff's expertise. "Being able to ask questions of coworkers with different ages, backgrounds and perspectives helped my thought process when it comes to approaching my future."

That is one of Cole's future goals, too — open as many lines of communication with as many people as possible. "I really appreciated hearing people's stories and how they got to Green Circle Growers. I wanted to pick their brains about what they like about their jobs and what drives them.

"I really wanted to work on connecting with the people I was meeting and really get to know the growers. I went out of my way to dig deeper and ask more questions."

When asked what he would have done differently during his internship, knowing what he knows now, he says, "I would have probably asked even more questions than I did!"

#### AN UNFORGETTABLE EXPERIENCE

Cole returned to KSU last fall and will finish up his studies by the end of this year.

Cole says working at Green Circle Growers was a terrific way to learn how to apply his education at KSU and get a good feeling for what it is like to work for a large-scale production operation.

Going into his internship last January, he wasn't really sure what to expect. "The scale of Green Circle Growers, from the number of employees and plants they are responsible for to the yearly profit and rapid expansion [the company is currently undergoing], was difficult to comprehend."

Looking back, he really appreciates the wide variety of experiences he had during his time at Green Circle. "I wanted to see as much as possible. I wanted to focus on having a well-rounded experience."

And that's what he did and it made a lasting impression.

"This internship will stick with me throughout the remainder of my education and career!" *gpn*

