



# LEARNING

*beyond the classroom*



GPN/Nexus Intern Scholarship winner Jennifer Browne.  
 (Photos courtesy of Robert Barker, Cornell University Photography)

Are you a small grower seeking new talent? The 2002 GPN/Nexus Intern Scholarship winner is now on the job market, and she's as enthusiastic as ever to make the most of her recent internship experience.

By Brandi D. McNally

**J**ennifer Browne just graduated from Cornell University's horticulture program. As you read this, she is rock climbing along the beaches of Thailand in warm, summer weather, enjoying her freedom from 4-year brain bondage and contemplating her future. Upon her return, the mountainous West awaits her, and hopefully, a job with a small grower.

The chances that she'll land the job that she wants are high, because Browne has something

to offer that sets her apart from other potential entry-level job candidates. It's not just the fact that she attended an Ivy League school, is exceedingly bright and hard-working, has excellent communication skills and can speak some Spanish. It's experience — six months of it through an internship with North Creek Nursery in Landenberg, Pa.

Graduates with real-world experience are hard to find, oftentimes because universities do not require internships for graduation. It's in

these cases that the firm guidance of an academic advisor who believes in the importance of internships is paramount, and that's just the kind of direction that Browne received through her advisor, Dr. Bill Miller. "If it weren't for Dr. Miller promoting internships by speaking of them in his class, and even pressing some students, like myself, about how important they are to really learn about the horticulture industry, I don't think the students would even know about such opportunities," Browne says.

## WORKING THE NETWORK

It was one year ago this month that Browne began her internship with North Creek, where she spent 2- to 3-week intervals gaining exposure to all facets of the operation. Propagation, growing, shipping, IPM, research and development, and administration were all part of the real-life curriculum. She took cuttings, sowed seeds and transplanted micro-propagated plants that North Creek bought in from specialists. In the growing department, she maintained the plants by ensuring they were clean of dead leaves, algae, liverwort and moss, and transplanted some species into larger plug trays. She learned that timing is critical when it comes to shipping. She scouted for spider mites, whiteflies, thrips, aphids, Botrytis and other plant maladies. She planted, pruned and weeded the trial gardens, propagated trial species, labeled plants, collected seeds, created ornamental container gardens and wrote plant descriptions for North Creek's Web site. She also took orders, created bills, organized the customer database, answered customer questions and kept the plant availability list up-to-date. In short, Browne was offered a well-rounded experience that made the most of her eagerness for practical knowledge and her hardworking nature. "She likes to jump in and do things," says Miller of Browne. "Getting dirty is not a problem. She loves the outdoors, and believes strongly in the linkage of floriculture and nursery production and ornamental horticulture to the environment and our quality of life."

Browne decided on North Creek because she has aspirations of working for a small operation — she feels that smaller businesses allow interns to learn more because they are able to become acquainted with employees and all aspects of the business more effectively.

Dr. Miller played an important role in securing the internship for her; he originally met North Creek's co-owners, Dale Hendricks and Steve Castorani, on a nursery and garden tour in Germany and The Netherlands in 1996 and has continued his friendship with the nursery through Perennial Plant Association (PPA) events and Hendricks' participation in Miller's Cornell class on herbaceous plant materials. Miller says that Hendricks is one of the industry's best in propagation technique, and with Browne's particularly strong interest in propagation, he knew that both intern and employer would be a perfect match. After a phone call and a few E-mails, North Creek was prepared to take Browne on as an intern.

North Creek has been working with interns for the past 10 years, even taking on some students from Europe. The nursery offers an internship to help students gain hands-on experience in the industry, as well as to contribute more well-rounded workers to the industry in the future. "[The intern] may decide they chose the wrong career after working here," says Castorani, "but that's better than finding out after they choose it as their profession." North Creek's name is out in the industry through trade associations such as the International Plant Propagators' Society (IPPS) and PPA, and through some universities. The majority of those who end up interning with North Creek, however, are sent through the nursery's network of friends and associates in the industry, such as Bill Miller. It's a network ♦


## Jennifer's Essay

*To determine the 2002 GPN/Nexus Intern Scholarship awardee, members of the GPN editorial board were asked to evaluate candidates on the quality of the experience, knowledge gained and the applicant's ability to describe the experience, including how it impacted their education and career path. The following is an excerpted portion from Jennifer Browne's winning essay.*

The greenhouse is 107° F today. Sweat seeps from my clothes and trickles from my forehead down the sides of my face. The few times that I have stepped outside into the 97° F summer day, it's felt like stepping into a breezy, air-conditioned room, and the few times I've gone to the bathroom inside the air-conditioned office, well, it has felt like the middle of winter. The radio is turned to some R&B hip hop station and Junior, Poncho and I are in a potting rhythm: Make a hole in the soil, tease the roots, stick in the plant, cover the roots, make a hole in the soil, tease the roots, stick in the plant, cover the roots... This is what we've been doing all afternoon for the last couple of days, and what we will continue to do in the weeks to come so that we can fill an order of 3,000 quart-sized plants placed by a single customer.

Potting is just one of the many activities that I learned about while participating in my internship at North Creek Nursery. North Creek is a wholesale plug propagation nursery located in Landenberg, Pa., that supplies perennials, grasses and shrubs, emphasizing Eastern North American native plants and their cultivars. During my internship, I spent intervals of 2-3 weeks working in every department. This included propagation, growing, shipping, IPM, research and development, and administration. Within each department I received one-on-one attention from the department manager who explained everything that happens within their department. I then helped them complete these tasks. Everyone

was enthusiastic and willing to spend as much time with me as needed to answer questions, and I feel that I was able to repay this favor by being that extra hand and helping them get things done. My time in each department contributed to a holistic learning experience, as well as taught me a unique and crucial set of skills.

The propagation houses were always warm and humid, averaging about 75° F. I worked side by side for two weeks with a tight group of eight hispanic women. Every day I enjoyed listening to them as their tongues rolled and flipped in a lyrical conversation that sounded more like passionate Spanish music to me. By the end, though, I was catching on. "Estaca" (cutting) Marie kept enforcing, pointing to the cuttings with a big smile on her face. The propagation methods, I soon learned, are very dependent on the species, but can sometimes be figured out by looking at the growth habits of the plants. For instance, Tradescantia grows little plantlets with roots that can be separated from the main plant. Grasses, such as Andropogon, can be divided in a similar fashion by separating out the eyes. Succulent plants, like sedums, usually root easily, but like most vegetative cuttings, they have to be stuck so that at least one node is under the media and the roots can grow. If we weren't taking the cuttings, we were sowing seeds, or transplanting tiny, micro-propagated plants that North Creek had bought in from specialists. 



Jennifer and her advisor, Bill Miller.



that Browne is now a part of. “[Browne] was able to experience the industry and realize that it is made up not of greenhouses, plants and technology, but of *people*. One of her emphatic statements was...how she has developed contacts that she can call upon for years into the future,” says Miller.

### THE EXPERIENTIAL DIFFERENCE

Beyond offering a doorway into the vast horticulture industry network, an internship provides an experiential value that cannot be derived from the classroom. “The value of an internship is that you get to learn the everyday ins and outs of a business, which is something that is hard to teach in a classroom. In a classroom, you learn the concepts, ideas and desired practices, but working for a business, you learn the reality of those things, the fundamental qualities of any kind of a company — finances, people management, advertising, etc., and realistically, the fine line between what you want and what you get,” Browne explains. She also believes in the value of an internship as a way to try on a job for size: “Sometimes when you think you could never imagine yourself doing something, you have the opportunity to experience it for a short time and may find that you enjoy it after all.” Or not, in which case the internship still offers a winning situation. “If the internship causes the student to realize he or she is in the wrong field, then, ultimately, we all come out ahead, and the student can retool and head in the right direction,” says Miller.

Regardless of whether or not an internship may mean an entire change in career direction, the most important thing during the experience is to ensure that the student derives the greatest benefit from the internship. While part of that burden is on the intern, the company providing the internship must also play an active role in making it a successful experience. Browne’s advice to growers interested in taking on an intern is that they go out of their way to make sure the intern has the opportunity to see different aspects of everyday business through, for example, sitting in on company discussions, spending a day with the owners, working in the office and learning about advertising and financial matters. “If you open the door to learning about these experiences, the intern will probably be more happy about spending an entire day watering or weeding or getting the ‘dirty’ things done,” Browne suggests.

She also views the internship as a potentially beneficial time for the employer to learn something new about their own business. She encourages the grower/owner to ask the intern for insight on anything they may have observed about the business that may improve it. “A lot of times, the intern gets to see, hear and experience things that the head grower might not know about,” Browne says.

Before any of this occurs, however, Castorani believes that both employer and intern need to have an honest discussion to make sure there aren’t any misunderstandings about what the internship entails. “There has to be a clear definition of expectations by both parties,” he advises.

If the student is not deriving from the experience what they had hoped after it has already begun, it is important to maintain an ongoing dialogue to resolve these issues. “Make sure that you are getting out of this experience everything you want and expected and if you are not, speak up!” ♦

### RUNNER-UP

GPN would like to recognize Jack McCloud, a senior at Colorado State University, as our runner-up for the 2002 GPN/Nexus Intern Scholarship, which carries a cash award of \$500. McCloud interned at Clackamas Greenhouse, Aurora, Ore., as part of the Vic and Margaret Ball Internship Program through the American Floral Endowment, from February-June of 2002. He spent three weeks in each department, performing such functions as planting thousands of geraniums, using a Javo machine to dispense and fill pots, conducting pH and EC soil tests, irrigating crops and pulling hanging baskets for Mother’s Day deliveries. He spent nights working past 10 p.m. fulfilling orders for the busy season and experiencing the realities of being a grower, and saw that there were lessons to be learned even in the most repetitive tasks. He had the rare opportunity to live with the owner, David Niklas, for the duration of his internship. McCloud also spent two weeks in sales training, accompanying Clackamas’ sales manager to places such as Home Depot


for deliveries. Through his various departmental rotations, he learned such things as the importance of organization and thoroughness; how technology facilitates operations and creates a more uniform crop; and how working in a set pattern helps keep things running smoothly. His experience was invaluable, and he hopes to be able to work for a company like Clackamas after he graduates this spring. **GPN**



Runner-up Jack McCloud

## intern of the year

Browne says. "A lot of times, the company might not know what you really want to learn. Also, be prepared and willing to do a lot of things for the company that need to be done. You are not the only one benefiting from this experience. I found that many times, even when I was doing work that I found less than interesting, I was learning a lot." She also advises that interns keep a journal and write down everything they do and learn each day. "You'd be surprised that you are learning a lot more than you think."

Although Browne spent all of her summers leading up to her internship working in the horticulture field, she says the six months she spent at North Creek taught her more than she ever learned over those six-plus summers combined because she didn't spend all of her time working in one position. She learned that she really likes the people who make up the horticulture industry — she likes that they are passionate about plants, friendly and willing to help others. She also learned that "knowing" about horticulture is not the same as "living" horticulture: "It is just as important to be open and good with people, and to be able to manage all different kinds of people to run a successful business," she reflects. And she learned that being a grower involves a constant state of becoming and evolving through trial and error. "Plants want to grow by themselves — you shouldn't be afraid to let them die." Learning, she discovered, does not end with the completion of a 4-year education supplemented by a fantastic internship experience; it is something that will continue throughout her life. 

*Brandi D. McNally is associate editor of GPN.*



### 5th Annual GPN/Nexus Intern Scholarship

Interested in picking up \$3,000 and being featured as *GPN*'s cover story just for articulating your internship experience in writing? You are eligible to apply if you're enrolled in a 4-year, accredited university during the 2002-2003 and 2003-2004 school years; working on an undergraduate degree in a branch of floriculture; and have the internship during the summer of 2003. The runner-up will be awarded with \$500. If you meet these requirements, send a cover letter requesting consideration for the scholarship and identifying the school you attend; a letter from your academic advisor recommending you and attesting to enrollment; and an essay that describes your intern experience, including who you interned for and what your responsibilities were. Materials may be submitted from August 1 through September 1, 2003. Essays will be judged by a panel of judges on the quality of the experience, knowledge gained and the applicant's ability to describe the experience. All applications should be mailed to: *GPN*/Nexus Intern Scholarship, c/o Bridget White, 380 E. Northwest Hwy., Suite 200, Des Plaines, IL 60016. For further information, contact Bridget at (847) 391-1004 or [bwhite@sgcmail.com](mailto:bwhite@sgcmail.com)



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