

ASHS Industry Feature: Ball Horticultural Company

Mercy Olmstead, Ph.D., ASHS Industry Division Vice President

Happy New Year! I wish the best for everyone in the upcoming year as we put 2019 behind us and look to a brighter 2020.

When I was a little girl growing up in Michigan, my parents would always get seed catalogs and we would dream about the garden that would flourish in the summer of that year. I had a lunch box full of cut-out pictures from these catalogs of various flowers and vegetables that I wanted to order, but we always had to whittle down the list unfortunately.

These seed catalogs were my first introduction to the world of horticulture, which eventually led me to a career in academia and now in the industry.

Do you remember what drove you to your path in horticulture?

In this column, we are featuring Ball Horticultural Company, a diverse horticultural product company that started in 1905 and continues to produce excellent horticultural products through three generations of ownership.



[Brief History of Ball Horticultural Company](#)

The company was started in 1905 by George J. Ball, who started in cut flower production. During this time period, flowers like sweet peas and calendulas were popular and as the market diversified and demand increased for other varieties of flowers, the company expanded their product lines.

Through the years, the company has expanded to include seed production and breeding through the acquisition of PanAmerican Seed Company and the establishment of Ball FloraPlant on the vegetative breeding and propagation side of the industry.

Interestingly, during the 1990s the arrival of home improvement stores as well as other “big box” stores greatly increased the demand for flowering annuals and production of these drove expansion during this time period. The millennial generation is one of the newest drivers of consumer demand in horticultural products, and it will be interesting to see how companies further add interesting products!

While the acquisition of other companies has diversified the product portfolio at Ball, what was really exciting in conversation with Mr. Mike Williams, Director of Human Resources and Ms. Katie Rotella, Public Relations Manager, is that the company is making a significant investment in plant science research and development to support product breakthroughs and improved efficiencies.

As a former member of the RosBREED SCRI project, I have seen firsthand the breakthroughs that can help an entire community of scientists with investment of research dollars. There will surely be great opportunities for undergraduate and graduate students coming soon!

Partnerships with Academia

Ball Horticultural Company also has a long history of working with academic institutions on major USDA-SCRI research grants to provide industry perspectives. They particularly value these relationships to help drive research results more quickly – working together always is more effective than a single company or institution working on their own.

They actively recruit student interns across the United States so that students can gain experience in several areas of the company. Interns participate in field days and develop projects tailored towards their interests, which is a great way to “try” out a career before you graduate!



Summer 2018 Ball Horticultural Interns: (L to R) Marcus Jansen, Anthony Soster, Abbie Clark, Lauren Kilpatrick, Madeleine Dubelko, Sarah Houtsman, Laura Dickey.

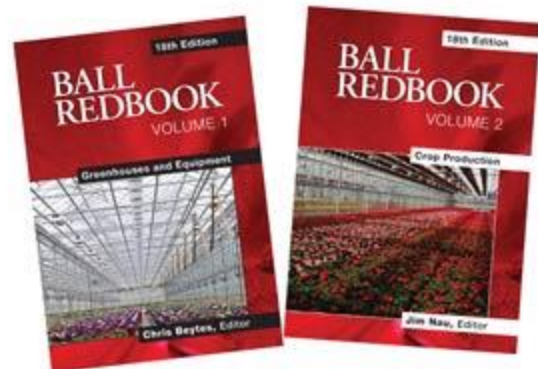
Horticulture at Work

Whether you are working on a project in a lab, in the field, or working in marketing and agriculture economics, there is a wide diversity of jobs within Ball Horticultural. Did you know that there is a publishing arm of Ball?

The Ball Red Book is an essential guide for greenhouse ornamental production covering everything from greenhouse structures, technology, sustainability, and production information for annual, perennials, cut flowers and other floriculture crops. The vast amount of information is now divided into two volumes.

With opportunities in marketing, communications, media and graphic development, horticulture production, extension - I wondered what kept everyone inspired, particularly considering some may have come from non-plant industries?

Mr. Williams said, “It’s a genuine interest and passion for plants that inspire us. Since our company is very product-oriented, it’s a great



opportunity for those to work directly or indirectly with plants.”

Advice for Students

One of the most important points in my conversation with Mr. Williams and Ms. Rotella was the request that students in universities across the United States continue to gain exposure to horticulture as a profession or even as a hobby, *so that they understand the opportunities for successful careers.*

Learning about horticulture through initiatives like Seed Your Future (<https://www.seedyourfuture.org/>) (started by ASHS and Longwood Gardens) and the Collegiate Plant Initiative (<https://www.collegiateplantinitiative.org/>) gives students who would traditionally not know what horticulture encompasses exposure to the joy of growing plants. When students are engaged and invested in horticulture, connecting and networking with those that share those passions can lead to great life experiences.

Another piece of advice offered was that students seeking a career should have a good idea of whether they want to work in the lab, or the field, or with consumers. While the decision doesn't have to be permanent, many large companies like Ball have several opportunities for lateral movement to different careers to ensure job satisfaction of their employees.

My thanks again to Mike Williams and Katie Rotella for their time, and to learn more about Ball Horticultural Company, check out their website (<https://www.ballhort.com/>).