

Student Spotlight:

Renuka Khanal

University of Arkansas



1. Tell us what you love about horticulture.

It is deeply hands-on and personal. Unlike large-scale crop farming, horticulture blends art and science to carefully nurture beautiful landscapes and fresh, high-value foods that directly enrich our daily lives.

2. Why and when did you get into horticulture?

I was drawn to horticulture during my undergraduate studies when I realized how vital plant health and genetics are to sustainable food systems. Seeing how plant diseases can devastate yield pushed me to focus on plant pathology and plant breeding to help develop

resilient crop varieties.

3. What inspired you to go into graduate school?

I wanted to dive deeper into applied scientific research and gain hands-on experience solving agricultural challenges. Graduate school gives me the platform to design experiments, optimize disease screening protocols, and contribute directly to crop improvement alongside world-class mentors and peers.

4. What is your goal after school?

My goal is to pursue a Ph.D. and continue my career in horticultural research, focusing on molecular breeding and plant pathology to support sustainable crop production.

5. What is your favorite plant?

The wild tomato. Through centuries of breeding, it has transformed from a tiny weed into thousands of unique and delicious varieties.

6. What would you research if you had unlimited funds?

I would breed drought-proof "super crops" that can thrive in the world's harshest, driest climates to help eliminate global hunger.

7. What has been the highlight of your graduate school experience so far? On the other hand, have you had any major research mishaps?

Presenting my research on a Genome-Wide Association Study (GWAS) for mineral traits in spinach at the ASHS annual conference, networking with the broader horticulture community, and following that event, successfully standardizing spore production in *Pythium* for large-scale germplasm disease screening. Research mishaps: Early in my pathology assays, calibrating literature protocols to induce consistent zoospore and oospore production in *Pythium* was a major lesson in patience! It took many trial runs adjusting media, light cycles, and incubation temperatures to get the protocol working reliably in our lab setup and honestly, a few stubborn isolates are still giving us a run for our money!

8. Do you have any advice for incoming graduate students regarding their academic and/or personal life?

Maintain a healthy balance outside the lab. Research is a marathon, not a sprint, so step away when you need to recharge!

