ASHS Leadership Academy Fellows
Went to Washington!

They visited DC to advocate for specialty crop research funding in the Farm Bill!
Well Done Leadership Academy!

Among the goals of the ASHS Leadership Academy Program is developing better skills for interacting with the press and elected representatives. Thomas Björkman and Milt McGiffen, former and current Chairs of the ASHS National Issues Committee, led Classes I and II in workshops on contacting legislative representatives, designing your “ask”, how to craft a message, and what to expect during a Hill visit. Six of the Class I and II Leadership Fellows visited the Hill on March 1st, accompanied by Louise Ferguson, ASHS Leadership Academy chair and ASHS Past-President, Essie Fallahi, current ASHS President, and the ASHS National Issues Committee members and staff. The Fellows went, saw, advocated, communicated, and educated their representatives and staff. Well done Leadership Academy! Thanks to Sally Murphy at the ASHS Headquarters for setting up the appointments with the Hill staffers and elected representatives and Thomas Björkman, Milt Giffen, and Bhimu Patil for their leadership on crafting the message.

Class I fellows were Julie Campbell from UGA, Wusheng Liu from NC State, and Heather Kirk-Ballard from LSU. Class II fellows were Matt Bertucci from UArk, Jeb Fields from LSU and Mengmeng Gu from CSU.

Here are some of their reflections:

From Dr. Wusheng Liu
North Carolina State University – Class I

Since I grew up in China, I had no idea at all about talking to elected officers on the Hill and advocating for the Farm Bill reauthorization and funding support for Horticulture research before I made the trip. After all the training provided by the ASHS Leadership Academy, I felt that I might be able to try it. Surprisingly, I found that the meetings with the Legislative Directors or Assistants in those congressional offices to advocate for more funding support for specialty crop research went very well and were much better than I thought. I led the meetings with the offices of Representative Deborah Ross and Senator Thom Tillis, both from North Carolina, and attended the meetings with 5 other offices. I learned how to pitch ideas based on the committees Representative Ross and Senator Tillis serve and the districts they represent, and educate their staff members about the diversity of specialty crops (rank top 3-), the wholesale of specialty crops (ranked top 6’), and the contribution of specialty crops to the farm cash (14%) in North Carolina, leading to advocating for more funding support for specialty crops. After I returned home, their staff members responded to my thank-you notes by saying “We’ll keep in touch, and please continue to keep us updated about how we can be helpful”. In addition, I found that pairing with ASHS peers for those meetings was helpful. Dr. Julie Campbell from UGA and I visited three offices together and we made a good pair of Fellows by supporting each other. I also visited four more offices together with Drs. Thomas Bjorkman, Essie Fallahi, and Bhimu Patil, and closely watched how they advocated, which was very educational.
From Dr. Matt Bertucci  
University of Arkansas – Class II

Our ASHS leadership class met multiple times over the past year learning about communication, conflict resolution, and our specific leadership styles. The capstone activity of our leadership academy was a trip to Washington D.C. to advocate for specialty crop research within the new farm bill. The ASHS Leadership exercises certainly came in handy when meeting with a congressional delegation to request additional funding for specialty crop research. I was able to utilize some of the skills to direct the conversation to a productive place and ensure the members clearly understood the priority areas of ASHS. I was fortunate to meet with Rep. Steve Womack and Sen. Boozman in person, and I was pleasantly surprised how favorably our delegates perceived the University of Arkansas, the Division of Agriculture, and the land grant system as a whole. The experience was a reminder that advocacy on the Hill is important, but the groundwork for this advocacy is founded on all the hard work and excellent research that occurs throughout the year.

Comment on Instagram from Dr. Julie Campbell  
University of Georgia - Class I

Finished up my ASHS Leadership Fellowship last week in DC. Thanks @ashs_hort for giving me the opportunity to advocate for horticulture. Enjoyed learning more about the process.

From Dr. Mengmeng Gu  
Colorado State University - Class II

The Capitol Hill visits through the ASHS Leadership Academy Program were instrumental to help me understand the importance of direct interaction with legislative representatives (or their staff members) and how we could make a difference in shaping the future Farm Bill, which is super important for specialty crop research and outreach spendings. I appreciate Sally Murphy, who made arrangements for all of us and myself specifically, the offices of one congressman (Joe Neguse), and both senators’ (Michael Bennet and John Hickenlooper) from Colorado. I also appreciate Dr. Thomas Bjorkman, who prepared a list of talking points focusing on the impacts of specialty crop-related research and outreach, and participated in our preparation meeting prior to the trip. We tried to make the best use of our time at the Capitol, and joined others when we didn’t have meetings on our own. During the meetings, I focused on my personal experience and told the impacts of programs such as Agriculture and Food Research Initiative, Specialty Crop Research Initiative, Specialty Crop Block Grant Program, and IR-4. It was a significant experience for my personal growth and I believe our cohort contributed to moving the needle on Farm Bill, maybe just a little bit---- thanks to the investment of ASHS.

From Heather Kirk-Ballard  
Louisiana State University – Class I

I walked away from the DC experience on a high note. The excitement of entering the halls of House and Senate offices and meeting with representatives from my home state was
exhilarating. Have you ever walked into a situation not fully knowing what to expect? Maybe feeling like you are out of your league or an imposter? This was exactly how I felt as I flew into DC for our Hill visit. However, I truly was prepared thanks to the Leadership Program training and the personal efforts of our training team. The training did not stop in the zoom meetings, this leadership team was fully vested and came along on our visits. The team did an excellent job of getting our meetings arranged and getting the message right. We were briefed, debriefed, and prepared. Mike Neff escorted me and Dr. Fields to the members offices and kept us aligned to the mission we were on. Can’t say enough about this experience. If you are considering it, just go for it. Change can happen when you show up and, “Your voice can change the world.” -Barak Obama, 44th President of the United States.

Photos from Leadership Class I and II Visit to Capitol Hill, March 1, 2023

Julie Campbell, Jeb Fields, Mengmeng Gu, Matt Bertucci, Heather Kirk-Ballard, and Wusheng Liu
Matt Bertucci and Rep. Steve Womack (R-AR)

Julie Campbell, Mengmeng Gu, and Wusheng Liu

Mengmeng Gu, Thomas Bjorkman, and Julie Campbell with staffer Julia Barry in the office of Sen. John Hickenlooper (D-CO)
Wusheng Liu, Matt Bertucci, and Julie Campbell meeting with Harrison Walker, Legislative Assistant, and Kate Barcley, Intern, in the office of Sen. Thom Tillis (R-NC)

Matt Bertucci and Sally Murphy, ASHS Staff, with Sen. John Boozman (R-AR)
Breakfast Prep Session at the hotel before heading to the Hill.
L-R: Heather Kirk-Ballard, Louise Ferguson, Essie Falahi, Matt Bertucci, Mike Neff, Thomas Björkman, Mengmeng Gu, Julie Campbell, and Jeb Fields.