

The Horticulture Club's Native Plant Program at the University of Kentucky

Katie Taliaferro, Anna Baloh, Shari Dutton, Richard Durham and Robert Geneve

Department of Horticulture, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY 40506 USA

klta242@uky.edu

Keywords: education, internship, leadership

Summary

For over 40 years, the Horticulture Club at the University of Kentucky has provided students with outside-the-classroom educational and social experiences. Over the years, the members' interests have changed along with horticultural trends. Primary interest in landscape management has shifted to a current emphasis in production and use of native species, especially as pollinator and wildlife plants. A major goal of the club is to provide opportunities to expand their

members' horticultural knowledge beyond the classroom including national and international study tour experiences. The current Vice President and former Native Plant Nursery Intern for the Horticulture Club, Katie Taliaferro, shares her unique insight into the inner workings of one of the most successful clubs in the Martin-Gatton College of Agriculture, Food, and Environment.

INTRODUCTION

The Horticulture Club at the University of Kentucky provides student members with leadership opportunities, expanded extra-curricular plant-related education, and life-long friendships. Currently, the Horticulture Club is one of the most popular clubs in the Martin-Gatton College of Agriculture, Food, and Environment, approaching 100 members from various departments on campus.

The club's mission is to:

1. Foster a spirit of friendship between students mutually interested in plants, horticulture, and related areas.
2. Provide a supportive environment where students can learn and work with plants.
3. Provide opportunities for students to broaden personal and interpersonal perspectives through travel and other club supported activities.

Members meet weekly to socialize and learn various aspects of horticulture and related subjects. The most prominent activity is propagating and producing plants for the club's Native Plant Nursery managed by horticulturist, Shari Dutton. However, the club's influence extends further into each member's growth and the larger community on campus. UK's Horticulture Club accomplishes this mission by providing students with weekly opportunities to dive deeper into horticulture through workshops, guest speakers, and trips to horticultural events. In addition, native plant sales, campus projects, and international trips enhance the campus experience by bringing people in for a common cause: a profound love of nature.

LEADERSHIP

The Horticulture Club has three committees, each with their own committee head: Plant Production, Sales, and Outreach. While the officers and committee heads are first faces of leadership students meet, the club relies on the thoughtful participation of each member to guide newcomers in the right direction.

Senior member mentorship is a large part of the environment and success of the club. As members grow with the club, they share their knowledge and experiences with newcomers, deepening their understanding of the techniques and procedures that keep plant production activities safe and the plants healthy (**Fig. 1**).



Figure 1. Plant Production Committee workdays give members the opportunity to practice their skills with plants native to the eastern region of the United States.

Additionally, tasks like watering the tropical greenhouse and maintaining the club's carnivorous plant collections are given to new students with a desire to learn; these individuals will then go on to pass

down their tips and tricks to the next member. This not only creates a stronger community, but also exemplifies how members learn the communication and technical skills necessary to thrive in their future endeavors by participating in club activities.

However, this community does not end when a student graduates. Several club alumni stay in contact, providing materials, workshops, and their unique skill set with current members throughout the year. Alumni specializing in carnivorous plant care and the native cut flower business have been key participants when showing students the range of opportunities the horticulture degree can offer them (**Fig. 2**).



Figure 2. The carnivorous plant collection was started by a previous Horticulture Club president who frequently comes by to help teach new members how to maintain the plants.

OPPORTUNITIES

The club is key for getting students the exposure necessary to discover and pursue a career in horticulture and its adjacent fields. Advisors and alumni provide invaluable

contributions to the club, providing students with professional connections and guidance. Another large role of club advisors is bringing awareness to scholarship and internship opportunities. Club meetings regularly include guest speakers and hands-on workshops, so students can get a glimpse into an expert's professional work.

In the past couple years, the Horticulture Club has used its connections to curate workshops to members' interests. In just the Spring 2024 semester, the club has eight workshops and guest speakers lined up in between workdays, sales, and tabling events. These workshops range from wildflower walks at a local nature preserve to hands-on work with bonsai and mushrooms. Utilizing these workshops, the club combines education with community to teach people of all majors how to enjoy and appreciate the natural world. Take, for example, a workshop done in the fall of 2022. Shari Dutton, one of the club's beloved advisors, shared her love of natural dyes by using the plants of the dye garden she had designed the year prior at the UK Arboretum. After giving a brief history of natural dyes and their uses, Shari taught members how to dye cloth with indigo leaves. An instant favorite among students.

UK's Horticulture Club also provides members with the chance to travel abroad. Over the past 25 years, the club has traveled on study tours to numerous locations in North, South and Central America, Europe, Asia, and New Zealand (**Fig. 3**). Traveling with fellow horticulture students and professors offers a deeper learning experience that encourages members to expand how they view horticulture with a global perspective. The club is designed to make these kinds of opportunities accessible to students. In 2023, four students were

able to use their volunteer hours to offset the cost of a club trip to the Canary Islands. Anna Baloh, a senior horticulture major and the current club President, enthusiastically encourages her fellow members to join these club trips. She has been able to use her

volunteer hours to offset the costs of attending two club trips abroad and four horticulture conferences. She frequently describes these trips as some of the highlights of her time at UK.



Figure 3: In 2023, the Horticulture club took a group of mentors and students to the Canary Islands where they learned production techniques used in a semitropical environment.

NATIVE PLANT NURSERY

The Native Plant Nursery is the backbone of the Horticulture Club, growing and housing 123 herbaceous and 45 woody species native to the eastern region of the United States during the 2023 season (**Fig. 4**). The club's Native Plant Sales program brings plant enthusiasts from around campus to purchase plants they know will support their local environment. These sales have become widely popular within Lexington's native plant circles. Students are given the opportunity to answer questions concerning the care and use of the plants.



Figure 4. A blooming passion vine (*Passiflora incarnata*) surrounded by Virginia creeper's (*Parthenocissus quinquefolia*) vibrant autumn colors in the Horticulture Club's hoop house.

In fact, many of the plants sold had been sown and maintained by these same students, providing a full-circle experience they can be proud of. The club's main source of funds comes from the Native Plant Sales program. Students exchange their volunteer hours for club funds to help

pay for their spot on the club's annual trip abroad or to cover costs at educational opportunities like conferences and symposia (Fig. 5).



Figure 5: Katie Taliaferro making a presentation at the 2023 IPPS-ER conference in Hamilton, Ontario supported by the region and partially funded by Horticulture Club funds.

Many of the plants grown as part of the Native Plant Nursery are used for planting projects on campus, the Horticulture Club has been able to provide professors and landscape architects with native plants to fulfill the campus's many needs. This can include for use in classes or to create large bioswales. The current project, The Diverse Landscapes Nature Rx, intends to beautify UK's medical campus using large blocks of colorful flowers (Fig.6). While the project does include many native plants, the Diverse Landscapes Nature Rx project puts an

emphasis on a plant's ecological functionality. This project aims to utilize nature's calming effect to reduce the stress of students and medical patients on campus. Approximately 4,000 plants were grown by the Horticulture Club with a substantial portion coming from the Native Plant Nursery. This is only the most recent example of the long history of the Horticulture Club supporting its community.



Figure 6. Katie Taliaferro tending to the plants of The Diverse Landscapes Nature Rx Project during her summer internship funded by the Horticulture Club.

CONCLUSION

The Horticulture Club at the University of Kentucky is a great resource for anyone interested in plants. As an industry that continues to grow, horticulture needs to encourage that interest in the field grows with it. The club is not major-specific. It is approachable for those with even the slightest affinity for nature and draws them in. Many are not aware what horticulture even is until they get the chance to experience it themselves. The club has been a turning point for some students, helping them realize that horticulture is their passion. Others may decide to add a plants and soil science minor. The Horticulture Club offers many ways to interact with plant production, giving members an opportunity to see what aspect appeals to them and their career aspirations. They can then use the club and its resources to gain the experience and skills they need.

Nevertheless, the students in chemical engineering and political science still have a place in the club. As stated in its mission statement, the Horticulture Club aims to create an environment where students can learn about plants. Education about nature is a necessity in a world that continues to be covered in concrete. Through their involvement with the club, members foster a thoughtful perspective of their surroundings. Something as approachable as a workshop on plant identification can make all the difference in someone's ability to pause and consider their impact on their environment.

My time as the native plant intern for the Horticulture Club was a truly enriching experience. Going into it, I had very little knowledge of or exposure to horticultural production. I had only recently switched from a biology to a horticulture major, having taken only one related class. I am incredibly lucky that the club advisors saw my potential and dedication despite this.

Over the next seven months, I worked intimately with nursery director Shari Dutton, learning the foundation of her work: thoughtful observation. It is simple, but much more difficult than I thought. That concept alone made each of my everyday tasks intentional. As I continue as the Vice President of the club, I continue to learn through my work with Shari and my peers. I try to show people the value of thoughtful observation. I know that I could not possibly explain everything I learned to my peers with other various majors. However, I also know that this intentionality will gradually strengthen anyone's ability to effectively take part in our workdays and sales.

Thanks to the Horticulture Club, I was able to have this opportunity and get paid during the process. Two years ago the club made the decision to use club funds to sponsor the Native Plant Nursery Intern position to support passionate students studying horticulture. Everything about this internship was incredibly impactful. It gave me a foundation to confidently pursue my future in horticulture.

Find out more about the Horticulture Club at UK at: Instagram & Facebook: @UKHorticultureClub or HortClubUK@gmail.com