



A Green Man wreath guards the house over the cold winter months

Ben Middleton

Royal Horticultural Society and Garden Club of America
Longwood Interchange Fellowship 2025/26

Six Month Report

Day one and my first lesson, Cicadas are loud! In the close night air of late summer, I am greeted on Red Lion Row by Andrew Gurka (Director of Student Programmes) and shown to my house for the next year. It seemed a long time since I had met him at the Royal Horticultural Society's headquarters in March for an interview. After months of waiting, I had finally arrived and I was shown to my room where previous fellow Libby Bettney had left me a lovely note with some excellent advice and a care package with the most vital victuals; salad cream, tinned rice pudding and Yorkshire tea. I collapsed into bed as the Cicadas serenaded me to sleep.



A very large Cicada



My house on Red Lion Row

The next two weeks were a whirlwind. New people, new places and paperwork, lots of paperwork. The 'Row' already hosted students from the various programmes run by Longwood. Year-long interns, Professional Horticulture students and other international student were met, hands were shaken and friendships kindled that would help me through the next few months. I saw my first Fountain Show, set to classic disco tunes and was left speechless at the extravagance of the display which include water jets that set on fire! After gaining a social security number, bank account, a fridge full of food, several inductions to the garden and my first trip to the pub (where I learned the dangers of strong American beer) I was set free to start my year in the garden.

One fantastic element of the Royal Horticultural Society/Garden Club of America Longwood Interchange Fellowship is the freedom fellows have to build their own programme. I was well supported by Andy and Lauren Hill (Domestic and International Studies Manager) to choose the areas of the garden that most interested me, and Lauren turned my disjointed ramblings into a coherent plan. My aim was to fill the gaps in my horticultural experience, so I chose

areas of the garden in which I had the least experience. For the first half of the year, I chose Conservatory Displays, Greenhouse Production and Plant Health.

In my first week with the conservatories, I was given a tour by Suzanne Boom who I later learned is President of the International Waterlily and Water Gardening Society. She is a wonderful teacher and generous with her knowledge, but I admit that I was initially overwhelmed. After ten years gardening outdoors in the UK, I was accustomed to being familiar with most of the plants I saw from garden to garden, but this was a rude awakening. Virtually all the plants I came across in the Main and East Conservatories, Garden Path, Silver Garden and Water Lily pools were from non-temperate habitats and completely new to me. *Cycads*, *Aroids*, *Bromeliads* and *Proteas* billowed from every border. Saying I was out of my depth didn't cover it. I felt more like I'd been chucked in a lake with a breeze block tied to my ankles.



Three of my favourite new plants: Stenocarpus sinuatus, Encephalartos woodii and Cereus stenogonus

This feeling was exacerbated once I began work with full time horticulturists Wyatt and Rick in the Main. I've always been proud of the speed I could work but after my first day planting, I was nonplussed at the incredible pace they got plants in the ground. I simply couldn't understand it, and it took me a day or two to get my bearings. After carefully watching them and others I began to realise how different the entire gamut of gardening was here at Longwood and that they have special techniques for everything, including watering the enormous hanging baskets with a 'shooter'.



Horticulturist Clay 'shooting' water into one of the several huge baskets of Rabbits Foot Fern Davallia fejeensis 'Major'

The speed at which planting happened in the conservatories was down to the regular and fast turn-over of plants. In the Main conservatory, part of the planting changes almost daily such that an individual visitor visiting a fortnight apart always has something new to see. This means plants barely have time to root into the soil so the techniques I typically followed of teasing out roots and firming around the root ball were obsolete. Gardeners are also expected to be out of the way by the time the gardens open to the public at 10am, so there is simply not enough time to firm each plant in during a change over. Longwood has specially shaped trowels produced for them by their metal working team to cut through the light manufactured soils of the conservatories with ease. It was difficult unlearning the habits of the past decade but once I had the knack I found my stride and began to enjoy my work with the team.

Next I set to the task of learning the plants I was working with. Taken in its entirety it was too daunting, so I began a family tree. Each time I worked with a new species, whether planting or pruning, I would pick one to research and add to the tree. I was able to do this thanks to the fantastic plant labelling at Longwood which is truly world class and made finding plant names a breeze. This has been such a useful technique I intend to use it at any future garden. Not only has it made learning the species manageable, but it has also enabled me to see the connections between families. One example being the Zingiberales order with the common identifying feature of growing from a pseudo stem. Suddenly I could see the connection between *Zingiber*, *Musa*, *Costus*, *Maranta* and so on.

Aiding with my desire to learn was the occasional and sudden appearance of Karl Gercens (Conservatory Manager) who has a predilection for testing students on the spot about the species they can see and/or what they are working on. I enjoyed the pop quizzes as Karl's knowledge of tropical plants is expansive, and he is eager to share his experience. I always walked away with a deeper understanding, and I thank him for his commitment to pushing students to learn more. It also gives you a special sense of pride when you stump him on a plant! While separating greens from root balls for composting once day, Karl challenged us to an A-Z of genera, each taking it in turns to name one. I had to defend by choice of *Chimonanthus* as he was certain I was confusing myself with *Chionanthus*, the native and very beautiful fringe tree. After telling him about the charms of Wintersweet *Chimonanthus praecox* I eventually prevailed! One point to me.



The Exhibition Floor looking resplendent in early autumn light

As soon as I had my bearings it was time for a change. The Chrysanthemum Festival, largest of its kind outside of Asia, ran between October 24th and November 16th. Every border without permanent plantings in the East and Main conservatories was ripped out and filled to the brim with Chrysanthemums of every variety, form and shade imaginable. The crowning achievement is the 'Thousand Bloom' or Ozukuri, a single plant with over a thousand individual blooms trained through a domed trellis and supported by one thousand rindai. Each of the 13 classes of Chrysanthemum, or 'mums' are they are known, are represented in the

display which is further complicated by the fact that each class can be grown as several forms; single stem, multi-stem or spray. Slightly sceptical about the charms of Chrysanthemums and exhausted by the work of planting, I surprised myself with the delight I took in the display once it was finished. It was spectacular and is a credit to the designers, gardeners and growers which began working on the festival over 18 months before. I've never heard so many people walk into a space and say 'wow' as I did during those weeks.



Thousand Bloom 'Mum' taking pride of place in the East Conservatory



Chrysanthemums fill the conservatories in every shade and form

Being on the sharp end of a trowel and concentrating on getting plants in the ground, I began to wonder how the process happened such that so many plants arrived in perfect condition, at the perfect time, and perfectly matching the planting plans. Clearly there was a huge amount of work behind the scenes leading to the display being installed and I wanted to understand the process, so I asked for a meeting with Chad Davis (Associate Vice President for Conservatories) and Jim Sutton (Associate Director, Display Design). They were both kind enough to explain the whole process from start to finish, covering the Chrysanthemum festival, Christmas displays and seasonal changes. I learned the way they could manage the scale of planting changes was to divide the conservatories into discrete units known as bedding, hyphens, columns and standards. Bedding is typically a mix of two plants, which flow around a 'standard', either a lollypop shaped tree or shrubby species specially trained to the same shape. Hyphens describe taller planting behind the bedding and columns as planting around the many columns holding up the roof. Each border therefore needs just five plants and designing from border to border in this way is eminently more manageable. Still, the depth of knowledge stored in Jim's brain and his impeccable eye for colour and form is truly impressive.

Once a design is set, it goes through several departments who purchase the plants to grow on, or to the growers who propagate as needed. Sometimes 'crops' do fail but Longwood has excellent contacts and can either make last minute purchases, or the horticulturists can find a work around with existing plants. Eventually after over a year of planning and growing, plants are delivered to the conservatories ready for planting.

But that beauty comes at a cost. In the process of making room for the Chrysanthemums many hundreds of plants were removed. Some were annuals or short-lived perennials past their best, but the majority were perfectly healthy perennials with many years of life left. I was surprised that at most ten percent of the plants removed were saved, with the rest being composted. I've since come to understand that the ever-changing bedding displays rely on bringing plants up from Florida, which are temporarily stored in the glasshouses before being displayed and disposed of. The rationale being that it is cheaper to buy in plants than the space required to store and care for them between displays.

Along with other previous fellows and international students from the UK (as I have since been told) I have found this level of waste difficult to swallow. While there are circumstances in which disposal is necessary, such as with the Chrysanthemums which risk carrying disease back into the collection, these are few. For some the 'wow factor' is worth the waste but I could not work under such a system full time.

Thankfully this is only a small part of the conservatory displays. I had a wonderful but brief time working in the Silver and Cascade Gardens which host more permanent displays and some of the most interesting designs and plants in the gardens. They share a common feature in that the design intent is instantly recognisable without needing interpretation, the Silver Garden as a dry river bed and the Cascade as a Brazilian forest. They are masterpieces of landscape architecture under glass. I wish I had more time there and would recommend to any future Fellows to spend time in them and with their knowledgeable caretakers, horticulturists Michelle and Matt.



The spectacular Silver Garden, my favourite conservatory at Longwood

The new West Conservatory also hosts permanent collections. It is the centre of 'Longwood Re-Imagined', a major re-working of the garden which included the building of the new conservatory. It is a state-of-the-art facility with a peaked roof designed to mimic the rolling hills of the nearby Brandywine Valley. Inside, it is a mediterranean style landscape across three 'floating' islands. I found the light and airy space calmer than the dizzying displays of the Main and a welcome counterpoint, with its trickling water imbuing a sense of peace amongst the throngs of visitors.



The brand-new West Conservatory with graceful beams and peaked roof

Again, the work largely involved replacing plants, this time shipped up from California with fascinating *Proteas*, *Banksias*, and *Agave* amongst the mix. But I also found some of the choices here difficult. As the garden is expected to be perfect at all times, plants which require maintenance such as *Eucalyptus* planted for their juvenile leaves, were replaced rather than pruned hard. I also felt the vast height of the space, rising from elegant branching columns to be underutilised, with the planting looking to my eye a little stilted.

There were teething problems with the technology too. The water filtration system couldn't cope with the high levels of nutrients from the source so regular algal blooms blighted the water requiring weekly vacuuming and occasional jet washing of the runnels. Humidity levels were higher than expected which isn't ideal for mediterranean plants and there was far too much light for the large plantings of *Clivia*.

Far from this being a criticism, I found this fascinating as I came to understand the unique challenges of building such one-off pieces of infrastructure. The conservatory is not yet a year old but every new building on this scale will have its quirks and personality. Learning how to work with the building and recognising its changing qualities through the season is a skill and shows the adaptability of the horticulturists in charge. I would love to visit again in ten years and see what the team have done with this incredible space.



The re-developed Water Lily pools with West Conservatory in the background

Working inside the West Conservatory and just outside in the waterlily pools are Tim, Suzanne and Corey who care for the aquatic plants. In the second week I was asked by Tim to help him cross fertilise *Victoria amazonica* and *Victoria cruziana* to create seeds for the world-famous Longwood Hybrid. Over the following weeks I helped Suzanne to pot up tubers of *Aponogeton distachyos*, removed spreading clumps of *Marselia mutica* and *Ludwigia sedoides* and re-located tropical *Nymphaea* from the pools in preparation for the cool winter weather. Working with the team was a great experience and I quizzed them endlessly about how to sow, pot, fertilise and care for aquatic plants.

They taught me many new horticultural skills and Tim encouraged me to read around the subject. Who knew you could eat Lotus *Nelumbo* seeds and make robes from the fibres! I found working with them such a pleasure that I will be joining them for the International Waterlily And Water Gardening Society Symposium in August.



Tim shows me how to remove petals, pollinate flowers then bag with a float until seeds develop on Victoria spp.

As fall fell and the woodlands faded into auburn and red, all talk turned to Christmas. Longwood's Christmas displays are a big deal, providing over a third of the annual income in just forty days. I had been warned early on that the scale of the displays was beyond anything I had experienced and required all staff in the garden to make the magic happen. On a Sunday night, as soon as the Chrysanthemum festival was over, the garden shut for three days and the madness began. Every spare hand from the horticulture teams and office staff were sent to the conservatories where the swathes of Chrysanthemums were unceremoniously hoiked up, decapitated and binned. Over the next four days, a total transformation of the conservatories took place with the installation of huge Christmas trees, thousands of lights and lots and lots and lots and lots (and lots) of Poinsettias in every imaginable hue.

The Christmas displays are the culmination of months of work in which I had just a small part. Every year there is a theme, this year being Jewels and Gems and all the full-time horticulturists had to produce their own project. I had been tasked for several weeks before hand to help Wyatt bring to life his idea of *Echeveria* gems. In a single instance, his project exemplified the incredible array of skills and capacities held in-house at Longwood, from the fabrication of the gems by the metal shop, to the buying team providing the plants, the

horticulturists in planting and the facilities team in transportation and installation. Making Christmas happen was exhausting work but huge fun and I will never forget the amazing joint effort and positive energy it took from the entire team to have such immaculate displays ready in just a few short days.



Custom made 'gem' forms made in-house by the metal shop



Beginning, middle and end. Tying on chicken wire, stuffing with sphagnum moss then planting Echeveria held in place with pins.



Left - planting walkway in Main Conservatory. Centre - walkway after planting. Right - fabric diamond on Fern Floor.



Team effort! Some of the students and horticulturists after finishing the Centre Walk.

The Christmas changeout marked the end of my time in the conservatories and I took a moment to reflect on the previous months. I had accepted the opportunity to join Longwood to help me answer two questions. Was I sure I wanted to work in a public garden and what area of horticulture did I enjoy most? The ability to pick all the areas of horticulture I've not previously experienced is incredible and one of those areas was working under glass. I can say with certainty that working in a public garden is now my aim. The most enjoyable part of my conservatory rotation was the regular contact with the public; I just love sharing in the joy of plants and in the excitement of visitors. As for being under glass full time, I'm not so sure. I missed the sun on my skin, feel of the wind and sound of the birds. Nevertheless, I've become enthralled by aquatics, Aroids and Cycads and would love to work with them in some capacity in future.

During this time and into the New Year I was lucky to enjoy another perk of taking a student position at Longwood, the Thursday trips. Most weeks, the international students and year-long interns are taken on a visit to a cultural or horticultural event or institution. I look forward to these trips and always have a great time thanks to the varied schedule planned by Lauren. We've had wonderful tours of the Brooklyn Botanic Garden, Philadelphia Zoo, Scott, Tyler and Laurel Hill arboreta, Chanticleer Gardens, Brandywine River Museum and Calder Gallery with its brand-new Piet Oudolf designed landscape.



Left – wonderful Autumn colour at Tyler Arboretum. Right – Calliandra emarginata, just one of the thousands of interesting and new-to-me plants at Brooklyn Botanic Garden.

But some of my favourite trips have been those with the local touch like the Unionville Fair (I 'judged' the house plant contest) and the Pennsylvania Agricultural Show, complete with its butter sculpture, 'Patriotic Bunny' display and 'Kiss A Cow' stall, a steal at just five bucks.



Left – 'Judging' at the Unionville Fair sporting my official ribbon. Right – Entries into the decorated pumpkin competition.

Outside of work and with some of the other international students I've been working to fill in the 'Americas Garden Capital' passport, hunting down stamps whenever possible with visits to Barnes Arboretum, Stoneleigh and the Mt. Cuba centre, which I've now visited three times.



Left – Colourful native border at Mt. Cuba. Centre – A striking group of Saracenia sp. at Stoneleigh. Right – Interesting bark on Clethra barbinervis at Barnes Arboretum.

A piece of advice for future fellows...make the most of the few warm months before the cold rolls in and gardens close for the season, grasp the nettle and get out and about as soon as you can. I've visited Mt. Cuba several times already as the gardens are beautiful but more so due to their fantastic research garden. At least in this part of the country, the movement to promote planting of native plants to support wildlife is far advanced compared to the UK and the research centre is a model I would like to see replicated back home. I hope to visit again in summer and meet with the director of their research programme.

But it's not all fun and games so as soon as the Christmas install was complete, I was straight down to Lower Production to once again be far out of my depth, this time in the world of nursery growing. I was introduced to the growing spaces by John Leader, one of two Floriculture Managers. John handles Lower Production and Kevin Murphy the new Nursery complex. Between them and their staff, they care for every plant that ends up in the conservatories.



Pacystachys lutea growing under glass in the nursery.

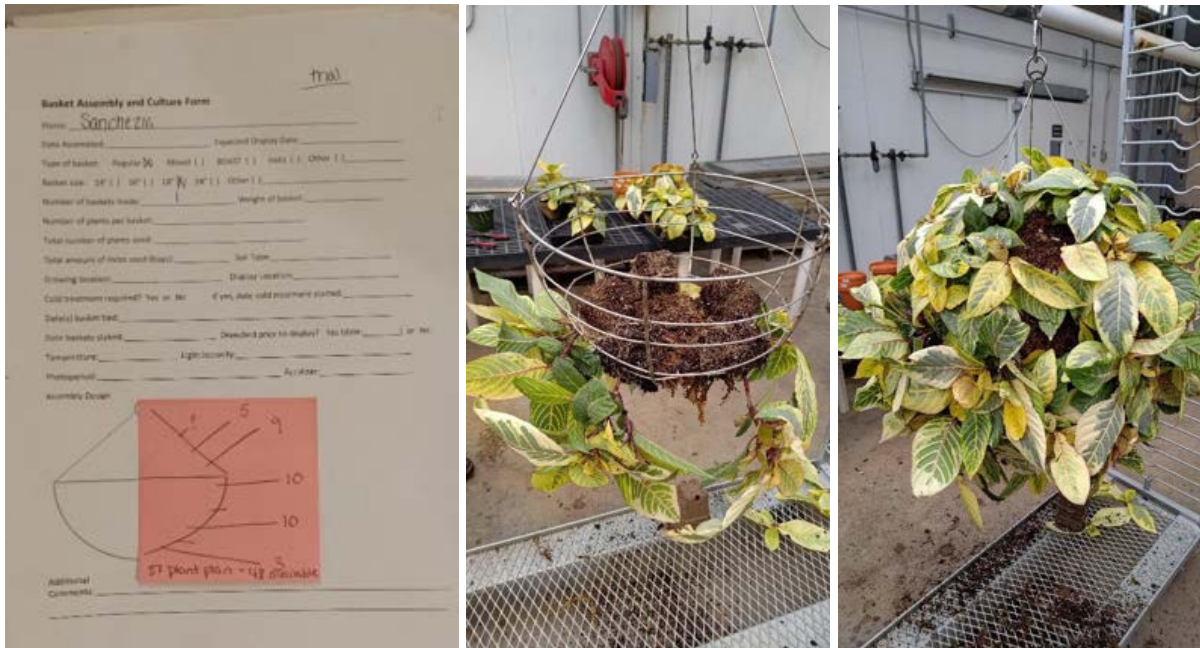
I quickly realised that Longwood only propagates a small quantity of the plants it displays, focusing on species or cultivars not in general circulation to make the most out of their facilities. There is very little point in them propagating tropical bedding on mass, with the staff and utility costs that entails, when they are so easily purchased from Florida or California where the sun (rather than LEDs and radiators) does the work for you. This means the work is in equal measure highly specialised and laborious.

To the mundane first. Plants need watering, staking and tying in. I won't pretend that hand watering hundreds of lilies, tying extension stakes to *Roldana petasitis*, putting rubber caps on thousands of bamboo canes, trussing up *Euphorbia fulgens* bowing under their own weight or four full days spent dead-heading *Streptocarpus saxorum* baskets were jobs I enjoyed. I found such jobs lonely, quiet and repetitive and they took up a large percentage of the time. It was a stark contrast to the busy and loud conservatories and again cemented in me the desire to work in a public facing role. And yet, to many of the nursery staff, working with the public is a nightmare to be avoided at all costs. It brought home to me how wide the world of horticulture is and that there is a space in the industry for all personalities.



Deadheading Streptocarpus saxorum is a fiddly job.

More interesting was potting bulbs, particularly *Narcissus* and *Hippeastrum*, the daily plant deliveries and the whole team efforts to unload the enormous trucks filled with new plants. But the real enjoyment came from working directly with the growers on their specialist tasks. I worked with Sarah to build the large *Guzmania* baskets sent to the conservatories, following her lead to read the 'recipes' of how to make them.



'Recipe' and process for building a Sanchezia basket.

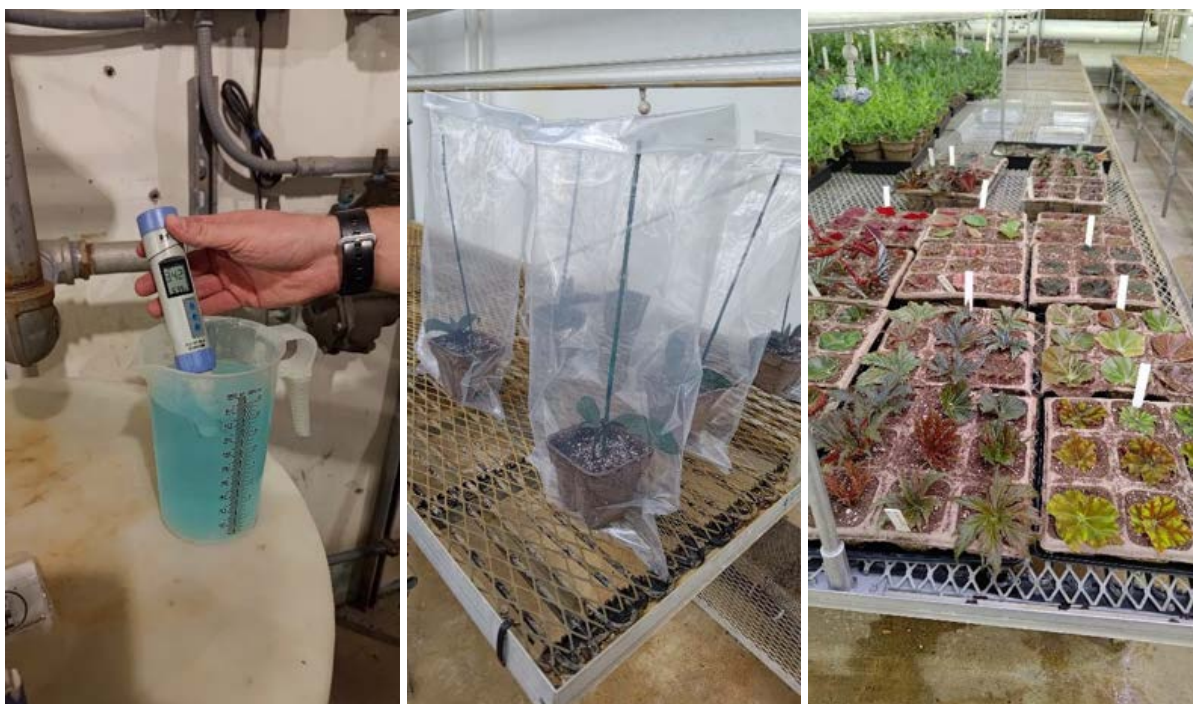
Her skill in turning semi-circular hanging baskets into a perfectly round orbs covered over with flowers was impressive. I was fortunate to work with Emily on next years 'Thousand Bloom' to pot the young plants into their final wooden containers through an arcane but ingenious system of internal wooden baffles, allowing the root zone area to be expanded over time without the disturbance of re-potting. Kassie taught me the proper way to water and how deceiving the top layer of media can be and showed me how to work the Argus automated irrigation system. Christine helped me to understand their trials of Plant Growth Regulators, used to restrict the size of the conservatory standards.



Left – Inserting baffles into ‘thousand bloom’ planter. Centre – Chrysanthemum in place. Right – One of the many custom-made tools, used for teasing out roots.

John answered every question I had about their technology and systems. He ran me through water quality testing, fertilising and how the computerised system for lighting, venting, heating and cooling worked centrally. I was very interested to learn the unique challenges Longwood faces compared to other nursery facilities. Commercial nurseries tend to grow a single plant on mass in any given greenhouse, allowing them to set humidity, temperature etc to exactly the right levels. At Longwood, plants must share greenhouses so there can never be ideal conditions for all plants at the same time. A similar situation arises with their nursery database software SBI. As software for commercial nurseries assumes plants come in and then go out for sale, it does not have a function to recognise plants sent to the conservatories then returned to production for re-use later. Working out ways around these limitations is a constant balancing act and I was really impressed by the flexibility and knowledge of the team to deal with those challenges.

There were two highlights to my rotation in Lower Production. First was the propagation work I did with Megan and Jess. She was a wonderful teacher, and I wish I had more time with her. Every cutting we stuck or seed we sowed seemed so exciting to me and propagation (rather than nursery management) would absolutely be part of my dream job.



Left – testing electrical conductivity of fertiliser solution. Centre and right – Cuttings of *Clerodendrum* and *Begonia*.

The second was a unique project given to me by John on behalf of the conservatory team. Clay, the horticulturist in charge of the East Conservatory has a small variegated *Clerodendrum* and wondered if it could be top grafted onto a *Clerodendrum quadriloculare* to produce a variegated standard. John tasked me with researching propagation and grafting of *Clerodendrum* but after scouring the internet and the excellent Longwood library (with the help of librarian Gillian who is wonderful) I could find no information or advice. It seemed like it has never been done. Unperturbed, I took chance on several different grafting methods. Christine gave me a masterclass on T budding, the method they use for their Poinsettia standards and a general overview of grafting. I then tried four different grafting methods to attach scion wood from the variegated variety onto the species stock. Four weeks down the line, I am overjoyed to see that five of the twelve grafts were successful, with the best results from a ‘side veneer’ technique. If the grafts continue to callus and hold, the plants will be displayed next year, and Longwood has gained a new technique to produce *Clerodendrum* standards.



Left – *Clerodendrum scion* wood. Centre – Grafting onto stock. Right – Graft has taken, putting up new leaves.

Looking back at this rotation I learned several valuable lessons. The clearest is that the quiet life of the nursery is not for me. While I worked with and learned about many new plants, I take the most pleasure in seeing the public enjoy them as much as I do. But I also learned that I love propagating and grafting. There is something so satisfying about watching a new plant come to life and in hindsight I would have spent more time at the propagation bench. Regardless, I am thankful to have a better understanding of what goes on behind the scenes to provide the horticulturists with the plants they need, and I had no idea the complexity involved in running the glasshouses or the challenges the growers face.

The end of my nursery rotation took me past Christmas and into the New Year. The few weeks around Christmas were the only time I have really missed home, but the other international students and I made our own fun. We joined together for a Christmas meal and, as can only be right in the mushroom growing capital of the USA, we welcomed in the New Year by watching a huge glowing mushroom drop from a crane into Kennet town square.

While my next rotation is with Plant Health, the last two weeks of January were occupied elsewhere. Just like the Christmas planting, the tear down requires extra hands pulled from other departments, so I had a week of mass poinsettia massacre which had a certain sense of catharsis after the extended festive period. Out with the old and in with the new, the fresh planting in blues and pinks is a welcome change for the eyes. And in with the new scheme comes the most spectacular standards I've seen yet, *Clerodendrum schmidtii* with trailing ivory pearls which glow in the low winter light, a real stunner.



Left – A mushroom descending from on high. Centre – Banksia spinulosa in full bloom. Right – Clerodendrum schmidtii looking glorious in the Main Conservatory.

With Christmas out of the way, I was very lucky to spend a week in Florida. I knew when coming to Longwood that the fellowship programme, with the generous support of the Garden Club of America, provides a substantial travel bursary. Rather than plan a year ahead from my room in Bedfordshire, I had decided to wait to take advice from the locals for the best places to visit. I had settled on Arizona, Hawaii, Tennessee and Colorado, all of which are coming up over the next few months. Closely missing out on the list was Florida and I was sad to miss it. In a stroke of good luck, I was offered the opportunity to visit the Tropical Plant International Expo (TPIE) in Fort Lauderdale, the world's largest tropical plant trade fair, and I jumped at the opportunity. One of the best perks of working at Longwood is their commitment to professional development, including allowing staff to attend conferences as part of their working week so, along with Martin Luther King day and a days' vacation, I was able to tick Florida off the list and spend a full week there with a group of students.

Over the week, we visited Viskaya, Bok Tower, Naples, Mckee and Fairchild (twice) the latter three of which are botanic gardens. All the gardens were welcoming to us while Bok, Naples and Mckee set up incredible tours of the gardens. I cannot express how grateful I am to the horticulturists at each of the gardens for their time.



Enjoying my tour of Viskaya with Longwood students. Sadly, I did have to use my own legs to get around the garden.

Tropical plants are new to me, and to be able to ask so many (including I'm sure some very stupid) questions was amazing and transformed the experience. I walked away from every garden having found new favourite plants and in awe of the beauty and diversity of tropical species. I could not choose a favourite. Viskaya was romantic beyond any other garden I've visited. Bok Tower was a masterpiece of landscape design. At Naples I found the space to learn so many new plants and was drawn to every quarter. Fairchild wowed with the most fantastic fruits, flowers and hulking trees (we visited twice) whilst Mckee was a wild jungle playground.

After the gardens, we spent a day in the everglades walking the board over the water, spying Alligators, slinking Gar and stately Ibis before joining a backwater cruise. It was worth every penny. Manatees browsed the mangrove trees from below, American Crocodiles basked in the sun, Ospreys watched intently over the water and Roseate Spoonbill soared overhead. I took far too many photos to show here, so I picked just one from each day to include below.



*Left – Flower of the Cannonball Tree *Couroupita guianensis* at Fairchild. Right – Screw Pine *Pananus utilis* at Naples.*



Left - Winding jungle paths at McKee. Right – Alligator basking in the Everglades sun.



*Left – Sweeping views from Bok Tower. Right – Fantastic Fig *Ficus* sp. roots at Fairchild*



A rare spot, the endemic and endangered Everglades gnome, complete with Tillandsia usenoides beard

Finishing the trip off was TPIE. Although signed up for three days, one day would have been enough as the show was selling wares to the trade and my interest in new colours of fiberglass pots quickly waned. Lesson learned that being a garden centre buyer is not for me. However, it was fascinating to learn more about how new technology is working in nursery production and how the pipeline between micro propagation, to nursery, to sale worked in practice. It was also a good opportunity to meet some of Longwoods long standing suppliers and find new cultivars and products on the market.

And the entire cost of the ticket (kindly supported by Longwood) was more than worth it for the fantastic seminar on Integrated Pest Management on day two. It was a mind-blowing lecture, packing decades of practical experience and the latest knowledge into an hour and a half talk. The speaker happened to have given some consultation at Longwood, and I walked away with a new found understanding of the proper way to set up an IPM system and how to properly integrate beneficial insects into it. She is also a historical re-enactor and makes traditional 18th century candy (which she shared with us) so a top character all round.



New technology and tissue culture techniques being showcased at TPIE.

I flew back to Longwood to find 12 inches of snow and minus 18 degrees C, the coldest weather I've ever experienced. Fortunately I love the cold, but I was happy to have returned from Florida warmed in my bones and soul from a brilliant week looking at plants. It has been an unusually cold winter in Pennsylvania, and we've had several extended periods of snow cover. We were warned from the outset that 'snow ops' was part of our duties as a student, but the snow has been so severe the garden made the rare choice to close to the public for a few days just as I had started with Plant Health. Cue two days of shovelling snow and the sad end of an era for me. I've been wearing shorts for work for five straight years, but it was deemed that -18C was a frostbite risk. For the first time in years, I had to wear trousers to garden and a small part of my limited mystique faded away into the chill February winds.



Left – A somewhat menacing snowman. Right – My final hoorah before being forced into trousers.

As I look ahead to the next six months, I can barely believe the opportunities afforded to me through the fellowship, thanks both to the GCA and RHS. I had an intentionally slow start, giving myself time to settle in, but now I have trips planned throughout the USA as well as further visits to conferences in San Francisco and Missouri and a possible spring holiday in Maine. I'm about to get hands on with Plant Health after a delayed start then spend two weeks with Orchids. After that, it's back to the great outdoors with Woody Nursey, Land Stewardship and Outdoor Horticulture. I can't wait!