

Emma Counce, 2017 Internship Experience Analysis

My time interning in the native plant nursery at Strawberry Plains Audubon Center (SPAC) just outside of Holly Springs, MS during the spring semester of my freshman year was truly a gift. Between my past nursery experience and interest and my being lost in this new collegiate world of decisions, this experience could not have come at a more opportune time. I got to work outdoors with new plants while meeting awesome new people who became my friends. I learned uses for plants beyond simple aesthetic value and educated others on the value of native plants in contrast to invasive species. I was given the opportunity to see and learn from the incredible drive of a small team of people who oversaw all of the diverse functions of the center. I was able to establish a more solid direction for my energies and interests as I continue towards my degree and future career. My time at Strawberry Plains is really what I consider the turning point in my studies, work experience, and understanding of where to travel with my passions.

Arriving at SPAC after having adored my work at a nursery in my hometown, I was fairly confident that I would at least be familiar with my required tasks and very excited to learn even more. I was interning with another student from my environmental studies class, Maddie Jewess, and we worked side by side all semester to complete our duties. These duties consisted of working towards the annual native plant sale held at the center in the spring. We worked diligently for about 3 hours each Wednesday from January until May repotting, reorganizing, and re cataloguing all the plants in and around the greenhouses.

Although the physical tasks at SPAC were similar to my previous nursery job, other components were new and offered space to learn and grow. We used more scientific vocabulary than I had in the past because these plants served a bigger purpose than simple aesthetic value

and often required looking at the larger ecological picture. Instead of using common names, we labeled all plants by scientific name. This allowed me to make connections between the different species by seeing that some belonged to the same genus or family. I knew that some species grew in different specific colors, shapes, or styles, but I did not know these small variations are called “cultivars” and are often the result of selective breeding. This detail played an important role in our cataloguing and organization.

I learned so much from the spectacular cast of characters I worked with beyond scientific terminology. Constituting the core of the nursery crew: My right-hand man, the most inquisitive and light hearted girl I’ve ever met, and a source of refreshing excitement was Maddie. I did not know her well in class before our time at SPAC, and was worried things would be awkward, especially in our car rides from Oxford to Holly Springs and back. She proved me wrong. We would always start a list of questions as we departed from Oxford and collect them to Google search on the way home. Her sincere attention to detail and ability to absorb even miniscule pieces of information inspired me. She challenged me to think more deeply and question everything in addition to making me laugh with her sweet and silly stories and comments.

If I were a 30 year old bachelor, my boss, Mitch, and I would be best buddies. He is the conservation education manager at Strawberry Plains and is beyond dedicated to the surrounding community and all of its people, plants, and animals. He has seemingly infinite stores of information about his place, and his people skills are impeccable. He can discuss a topic he is interested in with such excitement and wonder that you can’t help but be as enthralled as he is. He was always willing to answer Maddie’s and my own questions and provide comedic relief to the sometimes repetitive work environment.

The woman who inherited and owned the native plant operation as well as Maddie, Mitch, myself, and all nursery volunteers was Sue. Sue is older, probably mid 60s, and on top, on both sides, and completely within the cataloguing and organization of the plants as well as the set up for the event itself--and she was not paid a cent to do so! Her gentle nature and pure dedication is something one can not help but have the utmost respect for. These three and the other volunteers became my dear friends and were such a positive dynamic to be around. The freshness of their energy was something I desperately needed at the time, and I am so appreciative to still call them my pals.

This spectacular group of people taught me so much more than how to repot plants. When I began in January, I didn't fully grasp what "native plant nursery" meant, but came to understand the invaluable role of plants in their communities. A native plant is, as the name indicates, native, but more specifically a native plant has evolved and adapted to grow and sustain its particular area. Going up a tertiary level, the insects in that area have also evolved and adapted to feed and thrive off of these particular plants, and when compared to invasive species, most of these insects seem to only be able to digest native plants. Rising another tertiary level, the birds that populate and migrate through these areas diets' are made up of a huge percentage of insects. If invasive species start to outcompete and overcrowd our native plants, the insects will lack a food source, and in turn so will the birds.

This food chain reaction just within the native plant division of SPAC allowed me to glimpse their overall purpose. Educating the community and publicizing events are majorly important functions at Strawberry Plains. The Native Plant sale is an annual publicized event at the center, and Maddie, Sue, other volunteers, and I were there not only there to facilitate purchases, but also to let the customers know what these plants could do for the habitats within

their backyards. An impressive amount of people showed up looking for trees, shrubbery, ferns, vines, wildflowers, and wild grasses to create sustainable habitats within their own properties.

In addition to the plant sale, SPAC hosts many events ranging from the Hummingbird Festival to small art courses on the weekend. As part of my internship, I was allowed to attend many of these opportunities for free one Saturday morning in March I spent at the center's vernal pools observing and learning about salamanders. Another Saturday I was able to band then release birds through the MAPS program on Migratory Bird Day. Probably my favorite was attending a couple of the Mississippi Naturalists meetings. I learned about geology in Tishomingo State Park with Cathy Grace, a geology professor at Ole Miss, and visited the seemingly unknown but stunningly beautiful swamps in the heart of Grenada, MS with local artist, Robin Whitfield! SPAC's biggest event, The Hummingbird Festival, takes place every September and attracts thousands of visitors. There are activities for children, many speakers talking about various environmental topics relating to the operations of SPAC, local artists, and hummingbird banding stations.

The property itself is a habitat for the very plants, insects, and animals they seek to aid. Land management including maintenance of the many miles of hiking trails, wildflower meadows, and antebellum buildings is yet another function. I was not personally involved as much in overall maintenance outside of the nursery, but I know that the arms of the center are far reaching in this aspect. For example, just after Maddie and I started working, there had been a prescribed burn on one of the wildflower meadows. These aid in keeping out invasive species and allowing natives species more space to flourish. SPAC works with a prescribed burn association to aid local landowners in conducting safe burns of their own. There are also gardens around the antebellum buildings which require care as do the elderly houses themselves.

Having seen the dedication of the people I worked with and the beauty and liveliness of the place itself, I felt a better sense of direction for my passions. I was more than a little lost in my decisions regarding majors, minors, and future careers during my freshman year. I knew only that I wanted to do something environmental related. So I joined Environmental Studies 101, a gateway course through which I met Mitch and was introduced to Strawberry Plains. Going into the internship, I was not sure if it would or would not answer my ambiguous questions about my future, but I figured that, worst case scenario, I would know one thing I did not want to do and would have something cool to put on a resume. However, this far exceeded my expectations. It was truly the combination of the work, new and exciting information, and incredible people I met that gave me a sense of peace in the end. I remember the day of the native plant sale this May, my anxieties regarding the coming years had really peaked. I had mentioned to Maddie that I had lost my job at the garden center at home, and that was all that was really grounding me at the time. I felt as if I was falling.

Maddie, Mitch, and Mitch's girlfriend, Kendall, all talked to me throughout that day. I had considered majoring in public policy before, but did not want to end up in a small cubicle with angry politicians forever. I had seen Mitch's work and dedication, and I really enjoyed my time at SPAC. I loved the idea of having an intimate community of people to educate and land to care for. As much as I felt policy work was needed to tackle widespread environmental issues, I was terrified I would fall short. However, after speaking to both Mitch and Kendall, I was beginning to realize not everything is such a major and final decision. Kendall actually majored in Public Policy at Ole Miss with a minor in Environmental Studies (as I am now.), and told me not to worry about politicians. She works for the Office of Sustainability with like-minded people striving towards a common goal. Although her position requires office time, they also

plan events and other activities as well, some even collaborating with SPAC. Mitch told me that although he had majored in a field that Ole Miss did not offer, that it was not so much the degree that mattered as much as experience. Both of their advice really helped calm me down and realize that as long as I am eager and willing to learn, I will gain the experience needed to find the answers to my own success.

I cannot express how grateful I am to the plants, birds, people, and all the opportunities that came with my time spent at Strawberry Plains. Whether I was elbow deep in potting soil or wandering through the mossy woods of Tishomingo State Park, I was certain to be growing and learning the whole time. The connections I made there continue today, and the information I carry on brings me to be more mindful of my actions.