

Fields of Dreams

Many former AHS interns go on to enjoy diverse careers in horticulture.

Here's a look at what some of them are doing now.

BY PIA DA SILVA

For more than 20 years, the internship program at AHS has been going strong, thanks to the generous support of many dedicated AHS members. Over that time, it has grown from what amounted to a summer job to a year-round program where budding horticulturists can learn about plants and expand their career horizons.

Now, anywhere from one to three interns are at work each season at AHS's River Farm headquarters, doing everything from replanting flowerbeds to practicing integrated pest management and working on landscape design drawings for the Master Plan. Interns also have the opportunity to get involved with AHS's many programs, including the annual Seed Exchange, the Gardener's Information Service, the Living Lab program for children, and The Growing Connection.

Building on their experiences at River Farm, many interns have gone on to earn advanced horticulture degrees and pursue a wide variety of careers in the green industry. Former AHS interns are now working all over North America and even overseas, enjoying fulfilling careers at botanical gardens, in university research programs, as landscape designers, teaching in the Peace Corps, and writing for gardening magazines.

THE WRITE STUFF

One of the first interns to participate in the AHS program has since parlayed his gardening knowledge and passion into a successful career in garden writing with *Southern Living* magazine.

Steve Bender interned at AHS in the summer of 1979, working with two full-time groundskeepers to care for River Farm's gardens and buildings. Back then, according to Steve, parts of the grounds were wild and overgrown. "One of my great missions was to tame the gardens and hack back the jungle," Steve recalls. "I was cutting everything down, beating back the woods, so to speak. It was like cleaning the frescos at the Vatican."

Despite his enthusiasm, Steve's passion



Steve Bender is now a garden writer and editor at *Southern Living* magazine and books.

for beautifying the gardens was tempered from time to time. One of his more painful memories of River Farm is recounted hilariously in *Passalong Plants*, an award-winning book Steve coauthored with current AHS Board member Felder Rushing. Steve was on a ladder pruning an overgrown hardy orange (*Poncirus tri-*

foliata) when the ladder slipped off a windowsill, impaling him on the plant's three-inch thorns, which, he writes, were "waiting to extract every drop of blood from my body."

After his internship, Steve graduated from the University of Maryland with a degree in horticulture. He went on to work for Homestead Gardens in Davidsonville, Maryland, then joined the Garden Writers Association and started doing some free-lance writing.

Soon after, he discovered *Southern Living* was in need of a garden editor from the Washington, D.C., area. Needless to say, Steve got the job and, 20 years later, the rest is history. Now a senior writer at *Southern Living*, Steve is doing everything from feature articles to travel pieces. He is also the editor of *Southern Living* gardening books, which this year will include plants coded for the first time with AHS Plant Heat zones.

Steve attributes his success as a garden writer to his educational background in horticulture and the practical experience he gained working at places such as AHS. Overall, he remembers the AHS internship as an opportunity to learn about different plants and receive a well-rounded work experience rather than being stuck in a greenhouse watering plants all day. For prospective interns, Steve advises, "Try as many different things as you can and get involved with as many activities as possible. You can sit in a classroom all your life, but there is no substitute for getting out there and learning about things firsthand."

The AHS Internship program is not supported by any membership dues. Instead, the program relies on generous donations from individual members and organizations. For more information about internship opportunities with AHS, or to make a donation to the program, call (800) 777-7931, extension 136, or visit the AHS Web site at www.ahs.org.

DESIGNS FOR SUCCESS

Another former intern, Alastair Bolton, is doing his part to make the world a more beautiful place. His background in architecture coupled with his experience with plants eventually led him to establish his own garden design business in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area.

Originally from England, Alastair was unfamiliar with native American plants when he came to River Farm in 1991. "It was a great introduction to East Coast



Former horticultural intern Alastair Bolton at his garden design studio desk.

American horticulture, and AHS was a steppingstone to a two-year fellowship at the National Arboretum in Washington, D.C.," Alastair notes.

In addition to fulfilling all the regular horticultural tasks at River Farm, Alastair found time during his internship to do illustrations for the AHS magazine, which at the time was named *American Horticulturist*. "Interning at AHS is a great first step into horticulture and can be an excellent platform leading to other opportunities," he says.

EXPANDING HORIZONS

Many former interns say their experience at AHS, as well as the mentoring and contacts provided by AHS staff members, helped guide them into a particular graduate program or career path.

■ Elizabeth Pettit, who interned at AHS in 1997, is now a doctoral student in the plant physiology and molecular biology program at Iowa State University (ISU). Her decision to attend ISU was spurred by her experience at River Farm, where



Elizabeth Pettit, second from right, with fellow AHS interns Kathryn Swaim and Erika Dilley (left to right) and then Director of Horticulture Mark Miller in 1997.

she met fellow intern and ISU student, Erika Dilley, who raved about her school's plant sciences curriculum.

Future interns should learn all they can about the plants at River Farm, Elizabeth advises, because the information can be useful in more ways than one. "You'll always draw on that knowledge, if not in your career, then in your appreciation of the world growing around you," says Elizabeth.

■ For the past three years, Kelly Wilson's job has allowed her to appreciate nature on a daily basis. As the cutting garden manager at Hillwood Museum and Gardens in Washington, D.C., Kelly plants out seedlings, organizes the garden, and uses cut flowers to create arrangements displayed in the Hillwood house.



Kelly Wilson, cutting garden manager, Hillwood Museum and Gardens

After Kelly's year-long internship at AHS ended in 1997, she went on to pursue a degree in horticulture at Virginia Tech. Her experience at AHS introduced her to public gardens and inspired her to continue working with people to educate them about horticulture and the benefits of gardening.

■ This fall, former AHS intern Aliya Donnell is embarking on her master's degree in horticultural science at North Carolina State

University in Raleigh. According to Aliya, the internship with AHS helped her understand the practical side of horticulture as opposed to the scientific aspect that she learned about in her undergraduate course work. Aliya encourages future interns to



Aliya Donnell in the meadow at River Farm during her AHS internship in 2002.

"have a positive attitude, be willing to work, be willing to learn, be willing to admit when you don't know something, and don't be afraid to ask questions."

PROGRAM BRANCHES OUT

Two years ago, the internship program at River Farm expanded to include an opening for an editorial intern to work with the staff of *The American Gardener*, AHS's official membership publication. Several interns, including myself, have already taken advantage of the opportunity to gain invaluable writing and editing experience with a four-color, national gardening magazine.

Free-lance writer Pia da Silva is a former editorial intern with The American Gardener.