



GIVERNY ON MY MIND: A South Carolina Boy's Trip Abroad

By Wade Alexander • SCNLA 2015 Outstanding Student Award winner

Several months ago I was contacted by a professor, Dr. Ellen Vincent, about a unique opportunity in the North of France, an internship after my December graduation from the Clemson Horticulture department. Being myself, a person perfectly happy in South Carolina with no dreams or aspirations

of working abroad, I was little tempted, to say the least. But with graduation approaching quickly and a Master's Degree program not scheduled to start until fall, I figured it wouldn't hurt to hear more, as I had several months' downtime to fill. Dr. Vincent went on to explain that it was an internship with the

Claude Monet House and Garden in Giverny, France. "Claude Monet? Now that's a name I know. How can I pass up this sort of opportunity?" I said to myself. After surprisingly little effort and a few emails back and forth with the Claude Monet Foundation, my plane ticket had been booked and the arrangements made. I would be completing a month-long internship during April with lodging and food stipend provided.

As the time grew near and following the Brussels terrorist attacks only weeks before, I was apprehensive about flying into Paris, but the plane touched down and I cleared customs with no issues. Waiting for me was Miss Jan Huntley, head of the Volunteer Program for the garden. She is a very spunky lady with pep in her step, and I very much enjoyed spending time with her. We drove roughly an hour to Giverny though rolling green fields and pollarded trees. Jet-lagged and hungry, I managed to make it that evening to 9 o'clock French time before I crashed.





I started work in the garden a day later. My duties revolved around maintenance in the water garden, care of the garden surrounding the house, and greenhouse work. Being spring, the garden was already planted, and it was the time of the year for heavy greenhouse labor. All the summer-flowering plants had to be seeded, grown out, and potted up before they made it to their final destination in the gardens starting in late May and June. I logged many hours in the on-site greenhouses and poly tunnels where all of the plant material for the entire property is grown. We also spent many hours weeding to keep the beds pristine. As the head gardener, James Priest, pointed out, "We have to make the garden look like one moment in time all season long." The garden hosts 600,000 visitors per year and every one of them expects to see a real-life interpretation of Monet's awe-inspiring paintings. This expectation is a tall order to fill, but all staff members hold themselves to this high standard, which in turn inspired me to do the same. A gardener with a knack for painting, Monet was protective of his garden, going as far as to ban his children from playing in it. It made me laugh to think of what he would say about hundreds of folks passing through it each day!

During my time there I developed friendships with several gardeners, employees, and fellow volunteers. There was James Priest, the head gardener, who graduated from Kew Gardens in Great Britain. He is a very interesting man with fantastic knowledge of flora and history that he shares freely with whomever is interested. There was also Christian, the greenhouse manager, a



native-born Frenchman who had been working at the gardens since their restoration in the 1970s. He does not speak English, but is very kind and has a very dry witty sense of humor that made working with him entertaining as well as an education. Jan, whom I spoke of earlier, is a fantastic friend and mentor, and I will very much miss spending time with her. The other interns were Kay from Northern England and Olivia from North Carolina. The interns shared a little historic stone house across from the gardens where we exchanged thoughts and experiences from our very different backgrounds. I greatly enjoyed their company and appreciated their hard work. Working and spending time with those of such varying backgrounds really allowed me to expand my horizons about different peoples.

The French are a garden-loving society from the great cities to the countryside; nearly everyone seems to have at least a small flower plot. The people draw parallels between gardening and art, one seems to inspire the other, and this is a philosophy that many impressionist painters seemed to channel and embody in their work. Monet spent many hours in his garden and even more time thinking about plant choices and color combinations. He would test out color combinations in his garden before he ever attempted applying them to canvas. The landscapes of sweeping color and vibrancy which drew my eye this year have served as a muse for many artists and gardeners alike and are likely to continue to do so for many more generations. Being in this place for a month gave me a greater appreciation for the impressionist movement and for France and her people. I hope I can interpret many of the lessons I learned about floriculture, public gardens, artistic vision, and historic vernacular to

landscapes in South Carolina.

Although South Carolina and the Normandy countryside are very different in culture, I was surprised to notice the similarities among their rural communities. On one of my many walks, among the fields of flowering mustard greens and combines, I saw a pine timber stand outside of the town of Mesnil-Milon five miles away from where I was staying. If you closed your eyes and smelled the sweet sticky odor of the rustling pine needles and heard the logging machinery in the distance, you might just think you were in the South Carolina piedmont. The town itself had different architecture, of course, but was not so different than the small agricultural towns throughout my home state. People leaving long days of work in the gardens and fields around the area would wave at me, greetings were exchanged, and smiles were swapped, a vanishing formality in other areas, but alive and well in rural Northern France and the Southern United States. The simplest and yet most amazing realization that I have taken away from my experience is that no matter our nationality, our political belief, or our upbringing, we have similar curiosities. All it took was a crisp spring evening and a bottle of wine to spur a symposium of cultural and botanical conversation and thought. We were interested in each other, and the exchange we had helped us broaden ourselves and our knowledge. I write this on my final eve here after having learned so much, and I hope that from time to time when the local gardeners and my fellow volunteers look back on our conversations, they might have Carolina on their minds. But I know that when I remember them, I will always have Giverny, her people, and her gardens, on mine.

