

# Department of Horticulture

# SEEDS

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## Greetings Alumni and Friends of Horticulture!

I hope that this new edition of SEEDS finds you enjoying the beautiful world around you. It is indeed a great time to be a Horticulturist as business in the green industry is booming and interest in nutritious local food has never been higher. In addition to a very strong job market upon graduation, our students find that Horticulture is a great foundation for lifetime learning and that the critical thinking and communication skills learned in our majors serve them well in whatever career they pursue. As mentioned in last year's SEEDS, we will soon be joining the Plant Pathology, Physiology, & Weed Science (PPWS) and the Crop & Soils Environmental Sciences (CSES) departments to create the School of Plant and Environmental Sciences. The time line for formation of the new school keeps getting shifted forward as we jump through the organizational hoops one at a time, but it seems like we may be organized by this time next year. I would like to assure you that Horticulture is not going anywhere; it will just be living under a new banner. There is plenty of innovative Horticulture in the other two departments and our flag

will be flying considerably higher when the three departments become the new school. I am probably most excited about the potential for a stronger undergraduate program. Although we constantly work on improving our programs, the new organization gives us some great opportunities that were not previously available. For example, turf students will now become part of our Landscape Contracting (now Landscape Horticulture and Design) major. This was not possible before since the program was in the CSES department. New cross-cutting majors, such as Ecological Restoration, Sustainable Agriculture, and Plant Science will also be offered by the new school and should attract many new students.

We have seen several personnel changes since the last edition of SEEDS. Constance Close, our Human Resources specialist, left for a new position with a non-profit organization and Greg Peck, our pomologist stationed at the Alson H. Smith Jr. Agriculture Research and Extension Center (AREC) near Winchester, left for a similar position at Cornell University. We have a new administrative team and Sherif Sherif recently joined

us at the Alson H. Smith Jr. AREC to replace Greg Peck. I am also proud to announce that Jayesh Samtani has moved into a newly created Assistant Professor of Small Fruits position based at the Hampton Roads AREC. Are you receiving notice of our monthly e-newsletter? All monthly e-newsletters are archived on our blog <https://blogs.it.vt.edu/horticulture/>. To receive notification of publication, just send me your e-mail address at [rharris@vt.edu](mailto:rharris@vt.edu).

With kind regards,  
**Roger Harris**  
Department Head



## MORE INFORMATION

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Lions, and tigers, and... octopuses, oh my! Joe Parr (BS'83), Director of Horticulture at Busch Gardens and Adventure Island in Tampa, Florida, sent us some great photos of their impressive topiaries. They have a permanent year round collection of topiaries and also do a special spring show. The feminine Spirit of Spring shown here contains 160,000 plants installed one at a time.

# Horticulture Department News

## New Faculty and Staff

### New Administrative Team in the Horticulture Department

- Tabitha Hartman is Horticulture's new Office Manager and Human Resources Associate. She joined the department this past June. She decided to apply to the Horticulture Department so that she could work more closely with students, faculty, and the academic side of the university. According to Dr. Harris, "Tabitha has been an incredible help to the department in an extremely hectic period. She cheerfully took on the role as office manager and I am very grateful that she is a member of our Horticulture team."
- Horticulture's new Fiscal Officer is Hannah Neuse. She started in the department in the fall of 2015. She has lived in the Christiansburg area for most of her life and is an alumna of Radford University ('08), where she studied Studio Art. An active artist, she enjoys 3d and sculpture mediums the most.
- Debbie Osborne is our new Administrative Assistant, and she started in the department on November 14th. She recently retired from Montgomery County School District. A VT alumnus, she enjoys VT football games and has lived in Virginia most of her life. Her three grown children also live in Blacksburg.

### New Assistant Professor

We are very pleased to announce that Sherif M. Sherif has been hired as Assistant Professor of Horticulture, refilling our vacant tree fruits horticulturist position at the Alson H. Smith Jr. Agricultural Research and Extension Center (AREC). Sherif will be responsible for developing research and extension programs that support and improve the productivity and profitability of Virginia fruit producers. He will be based at the AHS AREC, but will have administrative ties to the Department of Horticulture and, later in 2017, the newly created School of Plant and Environmental Sciences within the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. Sherif received his BSc (with honors) and his MSc degrees in pomology from Alexandria University, in Egypt, and his PhD in 2011 from the University of Guelph, in Ontario, Canada. His doctoral work characterized signaling pathways associated with resistance to bacterial spot disease of peach. Since 2012, Sherif has served as a post-doctoral fellow and research associate, principally in the Department of Plant Agriculture at the University of Guelph. Please join us in welcoming Sherif to Virginia Tech.



## Robert McDuffie Retires

After 38+ years on the faculty, teaching hundreds of wonderfully talented students, and serving the last 2 years as director of the Hahn Garden, Robert McDuffie retired from Virginia Tech on January 1, 2017. He made a very positive impact on our students over these years, and leaders in Virginia's landscape contracting and design industry fondly remember his classes. He and Nancy plan to spend more time with their children and grandchildren who are scattered across the country. They also plan to work together taking groups overseas on garden tours, culinary tours, and opera tours everywhere. As many of you know, Nancy had a much-needed heart transplant almost 2 years ago and is doing remarkably well. Starting a new life together, they want to thank all of you for your constant prayers. You can be sure that they have been answered. If you need to find Robert, he will still be playing basketball at noon on Monday, Wednesday, and Fridays at the War Memorial Gym.

## Send us your news!

We are always glad to hear what horticulture alumni are doing. Please send us news about your employment, achievements, and special occasions. We will post your updates (unless you do not wish it to be posted) in the next SEEDS Newsletter.

Send your news to Alex Niemiera: [niemiera@vt.edu](mailto:niemiera@vt.edu).



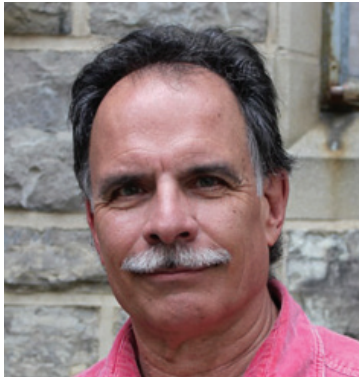
## Laura Yuhase is the 2016-2017 Horticulture Department Outstanding Senior

Congratulations to Horticulture's Outstanding Senior, Laura Yuhase. She currently holds many responsibilities in the department— as a Department office assistant, a teaching assistant in Barbara Leshyn's Floral Design class, and an undergraduate research assistant to Holly Scoggins. During all four years of her student career, Laura has been a valued member of the Horticulture Club. During her freshman year she served as plant sale protégé, the following year as plant sale chair, and currently she is President. She leads with efficiency and kindness— knowing when to step up and lead, and when to encourage others to take initiative. In addition to all of these things, she has an off-campus job, and maintains an excellent GPA. Laura does all of this with a strong work ethic and a bright smile. In the future, she would like to earn her Master's degree and become an Extension Agent because she wants to have an opportunity to improve other people's lives by sharing her horticultural knowledge.



Laura Yuhase. Photo taken by CALS.

## Horticulture Faculty Awards



Alex Niemiera has been awarded the W.E. Wine Award, the most prestigious teaching award at Virginia Tech. Included in his nomination letter graduate student Jacob Shreckhise wrote "Although Dr. Niemiera has many advisees, teaches various classes, and has research responsibilities, he always makes every student feel as if they are deserving of his full attention... he always greets each with a smile and a comment tailored to the student." Read the VT News article here: <http://tiny.cc/niemiera>



Dave Close received the Alumni Award of Excellence in Extension, an award for Extension faculty members who made outstanding contributions to the land-grant mission of the university. He worked with the Virginia Master Gardener Association and the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences development office to establish the State Master Gardener Coordinator's Endowment. In addition, he created the Master Gardener College Advisory Team to increase attendance at Master Gardener College. Read the VT News article here: <http://tiny.cc/dclose>



Susan Day received a Certificate of Teaching Excellence from the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. The nomination letter noted that "all of her courses require students to have a full appreciation and grasp of science-based concepts as provided by the scientific literature. She also implements the Hands On, Minds On philosophy in which students are challenged to make inquiries into the subject matter, to grasp a project in a real-real world fashion, and to stretch their intellect to come to solutions. Such an approach has long lasting and meaningful pedagogical results."



Jim Owen received the Blue Ribbon Extension Publication Award at the annual meeting of the Southern Region of the American Society for Horticultural Science in February 2017. He and his team devised an app to help growers understand and track their pour-thru electrical conductivity, alkalinity and pH measurements. The website, GroZone Tracker, is free to use and allows users to input data based on crop and/or location within a growing operation. <http://grozonetracker.com/>



# What's going on at the Hahn Horticulture Garden

If you haven't visited the Hahn Horticulture Garden lately, you will be in for some surprises. We have had a number of projects and events underway in the past year involving students, staff and volunteers. Here's just a sampling:

## New Entry Garden in parking lot

To solve some pedestrian circulation and drainage problems, we are building/installing a new garden space that provides a handicap accessible walkway from the parking lot up to the entrance of the Pavilion. The walk begins in one of the parking bays and extends through a garden space. At one point, the walkway becomes a bridge that crosses over a depressed area doubling as a 'rain garden' intended to alleviate the drainage problem.

The cost of materials for the Entry Garden are paid for by a generous gift from Mike and Pat Hyer. The garden is being built and installed by students in Hardscape Materials & Installation (AT 0174/Hort 3664) and Landscape Contracting Practicum: Rain Gardens (Hort 3584).



*Students working on the rain garden.*



## New pavers on bridge over Stream and Allee Gardens

As part of their class project, the class in Landscape Construction (Hort 3544) placed new pavers on the bridge. Over time the asphalt walkway had subsided so that whenever it rained, there was standing water on the bridge for several days afterward. New grades were set, the right amount of fill was brought in and voilà— drainage problem solved! And it looks great too! The class also installed a new 'roundabout' along the Allee Garden, creating an open space where several paths converge. It is the newest roundabout in the Garden and becomes part of the standard paving pattern for new walks in the Garden.

*Paul finishing up the newly paved bridge.*

## "Simply Elemental" 2016

After its success of the initial Simply Elemental exhibit in 2015, the Art in the Garden committee has teamed together once again to bring artwork into the garden from many talented artists throughout the New River Valley. During August and September, the garden was the setting for 34 unique art installations. Bringing in hundreds of visitors, the Simply Elemental exhibit has been a popular event for art and garden lovers throughout the region.

Plans for the 2017 Simply Elemental are in the works. It will take place August 1 to September 30, 2017. To learn more, visit <http://tiny.cc/elemental17>.

For more information on the Hahn Garden and all the things going on there, please visit our website and be sure to sign up to become a Friend of the Garden: <http://www.hort.vt.edu/hhg>



*Artists installing their work at the 2016 Simply Elemental Exhibition.*

# Alumni News

## Awards

The Garden Club of America presented its Medal of Honor to Diane Ragone (BS'77) for her work propagating the breadfruit tree as a food source to help alleviate world hunger. She is director of The Breadfruit Institute, a nonprofit, self-supporting institution with branches in Hawaii and Florida.

Initially nobody knew how many different varieties of breadfruit existed, Diane discovered there were more than 400. A mature breadfruit tree will produce fruit for decades— as much as 1,000 pounds per year, depending on the variety. Besides its value as a food source, the plant is also useful for construction materials, medicine, fabric, glue, insect repellent and animal feed. However, because it's seedless, the tree is difficult to propagate— something the Breadfruit Institute has pioneered. Diane and her colleagues have collected more than 150 varieties of the plant. She said the institute has distributed 73,000 to 37 countries in the tropics and subtropics. That's where 85 percent of the world's hungry live.

Roanoke Times story: <http://tiny.cc/dianeragone>



*Diane Ragone. Photo taken by Kauai online.*



Joel Koci (MS'99 Virginia Beach), Virginia Cooperative Extension Associate for Urban Forestry at Virginia State University (VSU), was recently awarded the 2015 Volunteer of the Year Award by the Mid Atlantic Chapter of the International Society of Arboriculture (ISA). He received the award based on his involvement with the ISA annual chapter meeting in Annapolis, as well as for organizing the ISA Day of Safety at VSU, hosting the test for Tree Worker Certification at VSU and for his work in getting VSU the prestigious Tree Campus USA designation.

VSU press release: <http://tiny.cc/joelkoci>

Mark Maslow (BS '04) received NALP's Young Entrepreneur of the Year Award which recognizes a young entrepreneur who has demonstrated entrepreneurial spirit and initiative, and serves as a shining example to students in pursuit of a landscape industry career. He will be recognized at the NALP's National Collegiate Landscape Competition opening ceremony (March 2017). Mark is the founder of Southern Landscape Group, a premier landscape design/build maintenance company serving Lynchburg, Smith Mountain Lake and surrounding areas. Full story here: <http://tiny.cc/markmaslow>

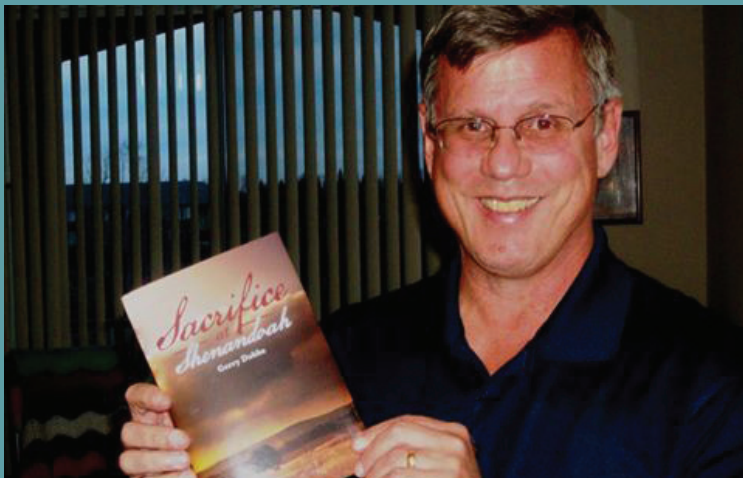


## Alumni Updates

Amy Wright (MS'98) was named Auburn University College of Agriculture's interim associate dean for instruction. Wright joined the Auburn faculty as an assistant professor of landscape horticulture in 2002, shortly after completing her Ph.D. in horticultural science from North Carolina State University. "Dr. Wright has a strong record of teaching and mentoring undergraduate and graduate students and of leading curriculum and academic assessment activities at Auburn," Patterson said. "I'm looking forward to the new perspectives she will bring to this important position in the College of Agriculture."

Full story here: <http://tiny.cc/amywrightdean>

*Amy Wright. Photo taken by Auburn University.*



- Joey Brinkley (BS '03) recently started working as a viticulturist for Trump Winery in Charlottesville. The property is 1,300 acres and about 200 acres planted to Chardonnay and Bordeaux varietals. Before that, he was Vineyard Manager for 2½ years at Fetzer Vineyards in California.
- Gerald Dobbs (BS'77, MS'95) has written a new book: *Sacrifice at Shenandoah*, a story about a young couple that discover the remains of a Union soldier on the Appalachian Trail.

## 2016 Outstanding Alumni Awards:

Outstanding Recent Undergraduate Alumni Award  
Mennen Middlebrooks '12

Mennen is a Landscape Designer and Salesperson at Tidewater Landworks, Inc. where he has installed over 30 major design and build projects in the Hampton Roads area. While he was a Horticulture student, he was a CALS ambassador, Saunders Hall Plant Bed Maintenance Chair, and President of the Horticulture Club. He currently volunteers with his local elementary school, Bayside Elementary, where he assists with the Garden Buddies program, organized the rejuvenation of an outdoor classroom, and coordinated a student design project display for a local garden show. This past April, he did a through-hike of the Appalachian Trail to raise funds for the Special Olympics of VA. Congratulations Mennen!

Distinguished Alumni Award Tom Saunders '81

Tom is currently Owner and Production Manager of Saunders Brothers, Inc. He has served in countless organizations, and committees which are mentioned in the article about him on the next page.

Tom has worked closely with researchers to tackle problems in the nursery industry. He held an information session at Mid Atlan-

tic Nursery Trade Show to educate growers on a new disease to the US called Boxwood Blight and coordinated soliciting \$15,000 in funding for Boxwood Blight research efforts at North Carolina State University. The research evaluated blight susceptibility and/or resistance of many boxwood cultivars and means to prevent the pathogen's spread. He has been recognized by the Virginia Nurseryman and the Southern Nursery Association for his water management and conservation efforts. In 2010-2015, he worked with University of Florida Horticulture Researchers in developing the first ever container nursery wireless based Evapotranspiration irrigation system. He has also served as past president of the Virginia Nursery and Landscape Association. Congratulations Tom!

The 2017 Outstanding Alumni are:

- Mara Grossman Outstanding Recent Undergraduate Alumni Award
- Scott Lowman Outstanding Recent Graduate Alumni Award
- Edward P. Milhous Distinguished Alumni Award

They will be featured in our next SEEDS newsletter.

## Tom Saunders Class of 1981

Since graduating with his B.S. in Horticulture in 1981, Tom has forged an extremely successful career in the Virginia and U.S. nursery industry. Tom is an owner and production manager of Saunders Brothers, Inc. in Piney River, Virginia. Along with 3 brothers and their father, they grow and ship quality plant material for the wholesale nursery trade supplying nurseries, landscapers, and garden centers from the Mid Atlantic to New England. Saunders Brothers, Inc. specializes in boxwoods and is one the largest suppliers of boxwood cultivars in the U.S. Their nursery has been generous long-term supporters of the Hahn Horticulture Garden.

Tom has extended his plant culture and nursery business skills into several venues. His many service-related involvements include: director and president of the Mid-Atlantic Nursery Trade Show (the largest winter trade show in the nursery industry); president and research board member of the Virginia and Nursery & Landscape Association; president of the American Boxwood Society; president of the Virginia Farm Bureau Young Farmers; committee member for the Department of Environmental Quality Technical Advisory Committee for Permitting Minor Water Withdrawals; president of the International Plant Propagators Southern Region Chapter; and key association positions for the Southern Nursery Association. Tom has certainly embraced and lived Virginia Tech's motto "Ut prosim" – that I may serve.

In view of all of the above, Tom had made ample room for a personal life. He has been married to Lyn Saunders (a Clemson Horticulture graduate who handles payroll for the company) for 34 years and has 3 children of which all have graduated from Virginia Tech. His oldest son, Thomas, recently received his MBA from the University of Georgia and now works for BB&T in their Capital Markets division in Richmond. Tom & Lyn's second child, Christi Lyn, is Saunders Brothers Marketing Manager and also assists with payroll. Their youngest child, Caleb, is a mechanical engineer living and working in Atlanta for a startup as a Solution Architect.

Tom has also been a little league coach for 13 years which included one state championship and three times as runner up. He serves as play-by-play announcer for the Nelson County



Football and Basketball teams from 2000-present. He also has served on the Board of Directors for the Piney River Volunteer Fire Department and for the Oak Hill Academy, as Chairman of Deacons at Rose Union Baptist Church, and as President of the Nelson County Green & Gold Athletic Boosters.

In addition to all of the above, Tom occasionally takes in VT home football games as well as some turkey hunting; his turkey-hunting skills are renown in Nelson County. The Department of Horticulture is very proud of Tom's admirable list of successes and accomplishments.



## Hort Hokies Rock the National Collegiate Landscape Competition

Virginia Tech placed **14th out of 62 schools** at the 2016 National Collegiate Landscape Competition at Mississippi State in Starkville, Mississippi. Twenty-one students from Horticulture and Agricultural Technology competed in 24 out of 28 events. Notable placings include:

- Justice Schlemmer and Patrick Riley — 1st place, Hardscape Install
- Christa Bush — 2nd place, Turf and Weed ID, and 7th place, SuperStar
- Brandon Goodrich and Steven Lamb — 2nd place, Truck and Trailer Op
- Trevor Rudisill — 3rd place, Small Engine Repair

Patrick and Justice won an all expense paid trip for themselves and a faculty member to travel to Louisville, Ky to compete in the Hardscape North America -HNA Installer Championship. Christa Bush was awarded a \$2500.00 scholarship from John Deere!

Fifteen Hort Hokies are ready to compete in this year's competition March 15-18 at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah. A special thanks to all of our sponsors that make this possible!

# Seeds

Department of Horticulture

Send information to:

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## Alumni Information Form

The Virginia Tech Department of Horticulture would like to have current information on your activities and accomplishments. Please complete this form to let us know where you are and what you're doing.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Year and Degree: \_\_\_\_\_

Home Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Employer: \_\_\_\_\_ Current Job Title: \_\_\_\_\_

Work Address: \_\_\_\_\_ E-mail Address: \_\_\_\_\_

News about Yourself (attach additional pages as needed): \_\_\_\_\_

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