This summer, I spent ten weeks as a forest intern at the New York Botanical Garden in the Bronx, New York. It was an exciting summer for the garden, as we celebrated the 125th anniversary of the opening of the garden and hosted the famous corpse flower that made headlines around the world. It was an incredible experience that taught me so much, leaving me better prepared for the upcoming semester and with an arsenal of knowledge I can apply to any job in my field. Jessica Schuler, the forest director, Maria Martello, and Erica Deluca served as my mentors for the duration of my internship and taught me more than I could have imagined. We endured long, hot days of weeding, laying tapes in massive patches of poison ivy all too often, and shared many laughs with the other two forest interns. It is a summer I will never forget and I am eternally grateful to all the staff at the garden and to Career Services for presenting me with the opportunity of a lifetime.

The main focus of the internship was completing the garden’s tree inventory, but we were encouraged to attend lectures hosted by the garden, as well as tours and info sessions that were designed to help interns and students find jobs in their field of expertise. Additionally, we had the opportunity to tour the many installations in the garden. These tours were led by experts in their field and drew me out of the forest and into the garden's iconic conservatory, the native plant garden, and their incredible rose garden, which features more than 650 varieties of roses. The garden also works closely with the Bronx River Alliance by participating in river cleanups and testing the water quality on the Bronx River. As a forest intern, I was able to participate in all of these activities and helped conduct research for scientists working both for NYBG and BRA.

The forest inventory, a process which involves counting and measuring each species present in a ten meter by ten meter plot, pushed me to draw upon my knowledge of plants I had
studied in my classes at Sewanee and from previous experience working in the garden at home. The inventory helps the forest team create the best management plan for the forest and allows them to see which management techniques prove to be more effective. Because some species respond differently to different treatments, it takes a while to create a management plan that is beneficial for the forest and promotes the growth of native species rather than invasive plants.

The inventory covers over 250 plots, each measuring ten meters by ten meters and covers the vast majority of the garden’s forest. The plots are divided into a series of rows called transects, which cover the span of the forest. The plots move west to east and create a grid, nearly covering the entire area of the forest. Each transect is permanently marked with a stake, allowing the forest team to return to the same plots each time the inventory is conducted. Over the course of the internship, we learned to use a compass for laying transect tapes, a caliper for measuring the diameter of trees, a clinometer to measure the slope of each plot, and mastered the scientific names for dozens of trees and herbaceous plants. In each plot, every species present under the sample line is measured and recorded, meter by meter along a five meter line. This allows the management team to obtain a rough estimate of the species composition in each plot. Additionally, we measured and recorded the tree species and the diameter at breast height (DBH) of every tree present in the plot that had a DBH of 1 centimeter or greater. After the trees and sample points are recorded, any additional species present are also logged. Each plot takes anywhere between thirty minutes to an hour, depending on how dense the plot is and how many species are present. The work requires a lot of focus and attention to detail but it was well worth the sweat and mosquito bites. With the help of the forest team, I learned to identify over thirty new species and was able to identify the subtle differences between plants with similar features like the snake root and the white wood aster.
When we were not working in the forest, I was lucky enough to work alongside scientists from the Bronx River Alliance who tested the water quality in the Bronx River and was even allowed to participate in a study monitoring the American eel populations in different segments of the river. I had never gone electrofishing before so participating in the eel study was quite exciting for me. Hosting the corpse flower was one of the most exciting aspects of the internship, even though it was not in our department. We snuck away during lunch breaks to sneak a peek and eagerly checked the live feed with thousands of other fans. The flower was nearly eight feet high and smells of rotting flesh when blooming. After much anticipation, it finally bloomed and people swarmed the garden’s conservatory, eagerly awaiting their chance to witness the monstrosity. Luckily, as an intern, I was able to bypass the two hour line to view the plant and slipped in to see it for myself on my day off. It was a rare event, the flower only blooms every ten years and the garden had not witnessed the bloom since 1939. For those who are curious, it does in fact smell like rotting meat but contrary to the media’s postings, the employees did not carry Vicks Vaporub on hand. When things were not as hectic, we also worked with volunteer groups from many big name corporations like Morgan Stanley and Guardian. Working with these groups made me appreciate being able to work outside and allowed me to share my knowledge and admiration for the forest with others. All of these experiences made for an incredible summer and made for a one of a kind experience living in one of the biggest cities in the world. I am confident that the knowledge I gained from my summer in at the New York Botanical Garden has given me the ability to excel in any field I wish to pursue and I look forward to seeing what opportunities lie ahead.