

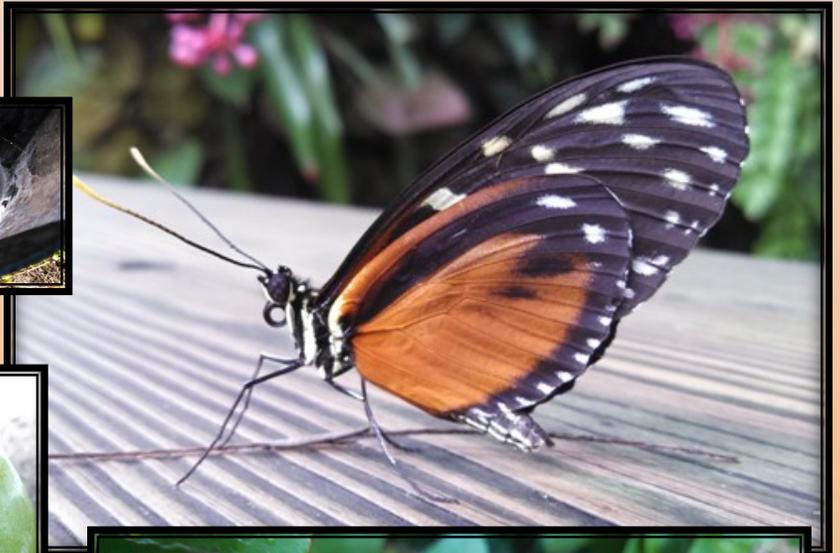
NEWSLETTER

UF | IFAS CALS
UNIVERSITY of FLORIDA

Spring 2016



Doctor Of Plant Medicine Program





External Advisory Committee

Ben Bolusky, Chief Executive Officer, Florida Nursery, Growers and Landscape Association
Reggie Brown, Executive Vice President, Florida Tomato Exchange
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Kayla Thomason, Treasurer
Wael Elwakil, Historian
Ploy Kurdmongkoltham, Secretary
Amanda Hodges, Faculty Advisor

DPM Program Staff

Amanda Hodges, DPM Director
Elena Alyanaya, Academic Advisor I

DPM NEWS

Volume VII, Spring 2016

Greetings!

<http://dpm.ifas.ufl.edu/>



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Welcoming Remarks!

Dear Students, Faculty, Alumni, and Friends:

Our Spring 2016 edition DPM News includes the following-

- A Faculty Highlight for FDACS-DPI Director, UF Assistant Professor (courtesy), and External Advisory Committee Member, Dr. Trevor Smith
- A welcome to our new students: Alicia Kelley, Taylor Smith, and Benjamin Waldo!
- A reminder to check out our new mobile friendly DPM website (<http://dpm.ifas.ufl.edu/>)
- Information about program updates and student accomplishments
- A congratulatory remark to our Fall 2015 graduate, Dr. Eric LeVeen!
- Our Alumni Spotlight article featuring Dr. Rafael (Andy Vega)!

I hope you enjoy reading DPM News, Volume 7, Spring 2016. Thank you for your support of the University of Florida, DPM Program!

- Amanda Hodges, DPM Program Director

Faculty Highlight: Dr. Trevor Smith

Dr. Trevor Smith (see photo above left) has served as Affiliate/Graduate Faculty at the University of Florida for the past five years. As an Assistant Professor (courtesy) in the Entomology and Nematology Department, Dr. Smith's areas of specialty include taxonomy, biological control, eradication technologies, regulatory agricultural issues, biomass plant regulation, and leadership roles in regulatory entomology. He provides mentorship to graduate students by directing research projects and delivering lectures within his areas of interest. Dr. Smith serves on several graduate student committees, including current DPM/PhD student Cory Penca. MS Entomology and Nematology alumnae Ashley Poplin and Katrina Pickens, and DPM alumnus Eric LeVeen, also had Dr. Smith on their committees.

Aside from his involvement with students as an Affiliate faculty member, Dr. Smith is also employed with the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services Division of Plant Industry (FDACS-DPI) as the Division Director. Although the appointment to Division Director was a...

"We are the front-runners in the war on invasive species. The job never gets dull. What we do everyday is truly important."

Continued from page 3...

...relatively recent change, Dr. Smith has been an employee with FDACS for almost 11 years. His involvement with DPI began 15 years ago when he volunteered in the Florida State Collection of Arthropods (FSCA).

While completing his undergraduate degree at the University of Central Florida, Dr. Smith visited DPI and the FSCA during a class field trip. His amazement at the sheer size and quality of the collection along with exposure to the real-world problem solving activities occurring within the regulatory agency, prompted him to choose UF for graduate studies. Subsequently, he began to volunteer at the DPI museum and has since moved up within DPI, holding various positions over the years such as Laboratory Technician IV in 2006, State Survey Coordinator for the Cooperative Agricultural Pest Survey (CAPS Program) in 2007, Bureau Chief of Methods Development and Biological Control in 2010, and currently Division Director in 2015. Dr. Smith is responsible for the supervision, management and administration of personnel and activities within DPI. Throughout his time with the Division, Dr. Smith's appreciation grew for the role they play in maintaining the integrity of not only the State's agricultural and natural resources but also the country's food supply.



In addition to working as the Division Director at DPI and Affiliate faculty at UF, Dr. Smith works very closely with the DPM Program as a new member of the DPM External Advisory Committee. The Committee provides stakeholder guidance and an external perspective for the Program to mold its students into plant doctors that best fit the needs of employers. The Committee consists of ten individuals with diverse backgrounds in industry, regulatory, academia and extension. Their valuable insight helps improve student and alumni recognition as well as long-term DPM Program initiatives. To learn more about the EAC and its other members, visit: <http://dpm.ifas.ufl.edu/external-advisory-committee/>.

Dr. Smith continuously supports and maintains involvement with DPM students and other faculty members. When asked to qualify the effectiveness of the DPM program at training students for regulatory careers such as his, Dr. Smith shared the following:

“I have been very impressed with the DPM graduates. There is a real need in the regulatory world for highly trained personnel with an extensive knowledge base of plant pests and diseases. PhD programs have become increasingly specialized, and while there is certainly a need for this level of specialization, it is not very conducive to scientists in the field having to identify a broad range of pests and pathogens and enact regulatory measures quickly. During my time as the Florida CAPS State Survey Coordinator, I specifically looked for DPM graduates to fill positions within our program. CAPS is our early detection and rapid-response team and is our first line of defense for new pest and pathogen incursions. In addition to the expertise necessary to fill these positions I was also looking for people with strong communication skills as we interact regularly with the public and must be able to communicate clearly the importance of a healthy and vibrant Florida agriculture and the need to protect this industry from invasive pests. DPM graduates fit perfectly into this role. In fact, we have hired nine DPM graduates here at DPI in the last seven years.”

Dr. Smith also shared a few words of advice for our student readers,

“Step outside of your comfort zone every time you get the chance. Most of our limitations are self-imposed. If you get the chance to take on a new challenge do so, and you will only be stronger for it.”

Plant, Pun, or Puzzle!

What does a plant do
when its friends are sad?



This new section of *DPM News* will be home to trivia questions, puns, or puzzles related to plant health topics. Think you know the answer? Check the last page of the newsletter and see if you truly are a *smartyplants!*

We would like to welcome our
new Spring 2016 students!

NEW STUDENT PROFILES

Alicia Kelley

Academic Credentials:

- B.S. in Entomology – Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN
- Co-enrolled in M.S. Entomology and DPM

Why DPM?

Entomology has always been my passion in biology. During my senior year of undergrad, I had the opportunity to work with honey bees, which introduced me to the world of agriculture and the many challenges growers face today. I became interested in how pest control practices affect the environment, especially pollinators. After graduation, I decided to pursue a job in industry where I worked with urban pests for three years. However, I knew I wanted to return to agriculture and plant pests, so I decided to pursue a Master's in entomology.

I chose a Master's program at the Citrus Research and Education Center after learning about the current epidemic of Huanglongbing in Florida citrus crops. Researching this vector-borne plant disease exposed me to several agricultural sciences, such as plant pathology, soil and root health, and microbiology. My desire to learn more about plant diseases from the perspective of other disciplines led me to the DPM. I wanted to expand my knowledge of plant health to become an expert in integrated pest management, and the DPM program was the perfect fit for these goals.



"It is our choices that
show what we truly
are, far more than our
abilities."

– J.K. Rowling

Taylor Smith

Academic Credentials:

- B.S. in Horticulture Science with an Organic Crop Production Concentration – University of Florida, Gainesville, FL

Why DPM?

I currently work as a full time employee at the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services Division of Plant Industry (FDACS-DPI). At the moment, I am working in the nematology molecular diagnostics lab but I will soon be transferring to the plant pathology section.

I decided to enroll in the DPM Program because I love the variety of curriculum and opportunities it offers its students. The applied nature of the program also makes it very practical for me with my career in a regulatory agency.



"Somewhere,
something incredible is
waiting to be known."

– Carl Sagan

Benjamin Waldo



“There may be people that have more talent than you, but there’s no excuse for anyone to work harder than you do.”

– Derek Jeter

Academic Credentials:

- B.S. in Applied Biology – University of Evansville, Evansville, IN
- Co-enrolled in M.S. in Nematology and DPM

Why DPM?

I desired to pursue a B.S. degree in Horticulture after a high school nursery project captured my interest in cultivating plants. I put that dream aside and attended a small liberal arts college in order to help me narrow my broad interests down to a degree in Biology. An alumnus from my college invited me to participate in an internship at Sakata Seed America in Ft. Myers, Florida in 2013. There I was introduced to plant pathology and decided to pursue graduate school in a plant pathology discipline as a result of the experience. I met Dr. Elizabeth Malek during my time with Sakata and she introduced me to the DPM program.

I was immediately drawn toward the interdisciplinary applied scientific approach of the program. After visiting Dr. Hodges on campus last summer, I was convinced this was the right match for me. My broad interests would be a benefit in this program and I could greatly expand my knowledge and experience in plant health. I look forward to contributing to the needs of plant care in Florida and currently am interested in the private sector for future employment. I am very grateful to God and all the people that helped guide me here. Go Gators!

PROGRAM NEWS & DEVELOPMENT

You can stay informed of the most recent events and important announcements regarding the DPM Program, like the ones seen in this edition of *DPM News*, by checking out our Facebook page at:

<https://www.facebook.com/UFPlantDoctors/>

You can also tune into our IFAS blog, updated regularly by Dr. Amanda Hodges and DPM student Ploy Kurdmongkoltham, available at:

<http://blogs.ifas.ufl.edu/plantmedicine/>.



The DPM Program would like to extend a special acknowledgment to **Elena Alyanaya** on her new position as an **Academic Advisor I!** Elena provides utmost diligence and attention to the needs of DPM Program and its students. We are all very thankful for her continued hard work, dedication, and courtesy. **Congratulations Elena!**



NEW DPM Website!

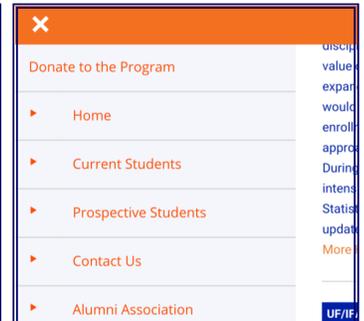
The DPM website has a new **mobile-friendly** website!

Check out the website on your mobile device at: <http://dpm.ifas.ufl.edu/>

The new website contains information for current students, prospective students, program contact information, and alumni association details.

Prospective students may be particularly interested in reading our internship stories, alumni spotlights, and faculty highlights.

See a screenshot of the new website from a mobile-view [here!](#)



A special thanks to Entomology and Nematology alumna, **Kelly Dexter**, for her work and dedication in revising the website with feedback from DPM staff, as well as current and prospective students!

[Donate to the Program](#)

Home
Current Students
Prospective Students
Contact Us
Alumni Association

Standard/PC View

Prospective Students

Admission Requirements to the Doctor of Plant Medicine (DPM) Program

To be admitted to the DPM Program, an applicant must meet the following minimum requirements:

- Possess a BS (or BA) degree from an accredited college or university, preferably but not necessarily, in an agricultural science or related biological discipline.
- Have earned a minimum Grade Point Average (GPA) of **B (3.0)** in all upper-division graduate coursework taken.
- Have an acceptable score on both the Verbal and Quantitative sections of the Graduate Record Exam (GRE) (combined score should be 300 or higher).
- Applicants from countries where English is not the native language must also achieve a satisfactory score on one of the following:
 - TOEFL-Test of English as a Foreign Language: Computer = 213, Paper = 550, Web = 80
 - IELTS-International English Language Testing System: **6 MELAB-Michigan English Language**
 - Assessment Battery: **77** or successful completion of the University of Florida English Language Institute program.

If the applicant meets all of the above requirements, you must complete the application process.

Program Exhibits and Student Recruiting

The DPM Program takes pride in the professional development of its students outside the classroom. During Spring 2016, the DPM Program was represented at several conferences, student recruitment activities, and outreach events.

- **January 23, 2016** - DPM/Masters student Alicia Kelley and Entomology Undergraduate Sage Thompson attended **AGRItunity 2016** hosted by UF/IFAS Extension - Citrus County Office at the Conference Center at College of Central FL, Lecanto campus. This conference and trade show celebrated its 10th year. The purpose of the event is to increase agricultural success in west-central FL. Alicia shared a few words about her experience at the event, "I had the opportunity to speak with Master Gardeners and industry professionals from all over Florida. My research is focused on citrus greening, and so I brought a cage of Asian citrus psyllids to show the attendees and answered their questions about the current status of citrus greening in Florida. We also had an insect collection of common Florida insects which fueled some great discussions about pests and the concerns growers are facing every day. I had a great time meeting with people and learning about the variety of opportunities in Florida agriculture."
- **February 4, 2016** - Each year several students and Academic Advisor I, Elena Alyanaya, represent the DPM Program at the **Annual CALS Career Expo**. Students searching for future careers and internships gather at the Reitz Union Grand Ballroom to learn about available opportunities. Event attendees range from upcoming graduates and graduate students, to inquisitive freshmen wishing to gain résumé-building experiences. DPM students are available to answer questions about the program as well as introduce it to those that might not yet know of it.
- **March 8-12, 2016** - Program Director Dr. Amanda Hodges, DPM/Masters student Ariane McCorquodale, DPM student Ploy Kurdmongkoltham, and Entomology Undergraduate Sage Thompson, represented UF and the DPM Program at the **Fourth National Meeting for the National Plant Diagnostic Network (NPDN)** held in Washington, D.C. To learn more about this meeting, NPDN and its mission, visit: <http://conference.ifas.ufl.edu/npdn/index.html>
- **March 13-16, 2016** - DPM/PhD student Cory Penca, DPM/Masters student Lisbeth Espinoza, DPM student Nicole Casuso, and Program Director Dr. Amanda Hodges attended the **90th Annual Southeastern Branch Meeting** for the Entomological Society of America (SEB-ESA) held in Raleigh, NC. Both Lisbeth and Nicole presented during the Turf and Ornamental Symposium. A special congratulations to Cory for being awarded second place in one of the PhD Student Oral Competitions.

...continued on next page

Below Photo Captions

Left (from left to right): Lisbeth Espinoza, Daniel Mancero, Christopher Ferguson, Ariane McCorquodale, Elena Alyanaya, Ploy Kurdmongkoltham

Middle (from left to right): Dr. Amanda Hodges, Sage Thompson, Ariane McCorquodale, Ploy Kurdmongkoltham

Right (from left to right): Lisbeth Espinoza, Dr. Amanda Hodges, Cory Penca, Nicole Casuso





Photo Captions

Top left (from left to right): Nicole Casuso and Sage Thompson presenting to students at the Hilliard Middle-Senior High School outreach event

Bottom left: Arjun Khadka tabling at BugFest

Top right: Group photo of attendees at Old World Bollworm Identification Training

Bottom right (from left to right): Cory Penca and Dr. Raj Singh at the Sentinel Plant Network Workshop



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- **April 1, 2016** - DPM student Nicole Casuso and Undergraduate student Sage Thompson were invited by DPM alumna Dr. Carla Calvert Burkle, to participate in an outreach event at the Hilliard Middle-Senior High School. Nicole and Sage gave a presentation on the importance of entomology in agriculture and briefly discussed career opportunities in agriculture. Students were actively engaged during the presentation by viewing live and pinned specimens and participating in a short Q&A session.
- **April 2, 2016** - Program Director Dr. Amanda Hodges and DPM/Masters student Arjun Khadka represented the DPM Program at **BugFest 2016: Around the World in 80 Bugs** hosted by the UF Entomology Club within Entomology and Nematology Department at Steinmetz Hall. This outreach event provides attendees with information about academics and careers available to students interested in life sciences with an entomological focus. Dr. Hodges and Arjun helped with BugFest activities and were available to answer questions about the DPM Program as a possible graduate program option for entomology students.
- **April 7 & 8, 2016** - The UF Entomology and Nematology Department hosted an **Identification Training Session for Old World Bollworm**, *Helicoverpa armigera*, as a complement to the **USDA Strategic Planning Workshop** held at FDACS-DPI April 4-6, 2016. The primary goal of the workshop was to provide practical screening and identification training for identifiers, survey specialists, NPDN diagnosticians, and extension specialists. Participants also learned about basic morphology used to identify Noctuidae of regulatory significance aside from Old World Bollworm, *H. armigera*. Program Director, Dr. Amanda Hodges and DPM/PhD Student Cory Penca assisted with the training. DPM/Master's student Arjun Khadka and DPM student Nicole Casuso attended the training. Nicole also aided in transporting event attendees to and from the training.
- **April 19 & 20, 2016** - DPM/PhD student Cory Penca traveled to New Orleans to assist in a **Sentinel Plant Network (SPN) Workshop** held at the Longue Vue House and Gardens. SPN is a partnership between NPDN and the American Public Gardens Association (APGA) that works to recruit, engage and train public gardens to assist in the effort to detect serious plant pests and diseases. Workshop attendees included staff from public gardens throughout the southeast. At the workshop Cory assisted in a hands on lab session, providing instruction on how to diagnose insect injury and disease to garden plants. In addition, Cory provided information about palm weevils, the Old World bollworm, and laurel wilt during the SPN pest update session. Cory was joined by DPM alumni and LSU Plant Pathologist Dr. Raj Singh (*see left*), who provided expertise in diagnoses of plant diseases and led workshop attendees in a "pest walk" of the host gardens, where he trained attendees in the art of plant pest and disease observation.

Postharvest Technologies for Horticultural Crops - HOS5320 *(Article and photos by Wael Elwakil)*



Above: Fresh vegetables are bundled and packaged into shipping cartons. Plastic sleeves are also used to reduce water loss in some commodities.

citrus orchards. At each location we discussed harvesting techniques, related concerns and disorders, and management practices implemented by growers to combat these issues.

Additionally, we visited the Cutrale orange juicing processing plant and learned about their aseptic techniques and sanitation process which uses 100% orange juice extracted from the fruit. We discovered that the plant reuses water from concentrating juice for different purposes. The plant works only six months of the year juicing fruit and continues distributing the stored juice for the rest of the year. They also have an underground piping system that transports juice to the neighboring bottling plant, which saves money and time from the transport process.

One of the major food processing plants we visited was Del Monte Foods. They have banana-ripening facilities and also process vegetables and fruits including celery, colored bell peppers, cantaloupe, watermelon, mango, strawberry, blueberries and more. Many Del Monte products are available in supermarkets as fresh-cut produce. We were able to watch the fruit processing under strict sanitation conditions.

The class also visited fresh produce markets and discussed the unique storage and handling conditions of fresh produce among the different vendors and how would these various practices affect the quality and shelf life of these products.

I came back from this trip with a different prospective for food safety requirements and all the efforts that pool in the agricultural process to produce safe products at prices that compete in the market and having the products available at the right timing.

While it is important to learn and receive training on plant pest management and tactics that can improve plant health in the field (as required in the Doctor of Plant Medicine Program), I think it is also critical to understand what happens to harvested products from processing to storage as well as shipping and marketing.

Postharvest Technologies for Horticultural Crops is a course offered by the Horticultural Sciences Department and instructed by Dr. Steven Sargent and Dr. Mark Ritenour. It is designed to teach students about harvest, packing, storage, food processing, packaging and marketing of fresh fruits and vegetables grown in Florida.

The class consisted of two other DPM students, Chris Ferguson and John Bonkowski, and several students from different departments. We toured central and south Florida for five days over Spring Break to visit different vegetable and



Above: Oranges are conveyed over the packing line for cleaning, sorting, sanitation and packing.

Below: Mechanized tipping systems are used to gently transfer large quantities of produce out of bins and onto packing lines.



Student Accomplishments

Students in the DPM Program excel not only in their academic pursuits but also in extracurricular involvement and their external work experiences. *DPM News* would like to acknowledge the achievements of the following students.

Blaire Colvin

At the 41st Annual Membership Meeting of the Florida Peanut Producers Association (FPPA), Jeffrey Spencer, a Farm Credit of Florida representative, presented DPM/PhD student Blaire Colvin as the recipient of the 2016 Florida Young Peanut Farmer of the Year Award. More information about Blaire Colvin and the award she received can be found online on page 7 of the [April 2016 issue](#) of “*Southeastern Peanut Farmer*”.



Alicia Kelley

Alicia Kelley was awarded 2nd Place Graduate Poster at the “Posters and Pastries” Symposium hosted by the UF Citrus Research and Education Center in Lake Alfred, FL. Her poster titled, “Effect of thermal therapy on acquisition of *Candidatus Liberibacter asiaticus* by the Asian citrus psyllid, *Diaphorina citri*”, highlighted research focused on the efficacy of treating infected citrus trees with heat, and whether psyllids still acquire CLAs after this treatment.



“Our goals are to determine 1) whether the treatment is reducing CLAs titers in the trees, and 2) whether the psyllids feeding on those trees are still able to acquire the pathogen. This will help us make recommendations to growers on how to best apply thermal therapy in their groves and what other supplementary control measures they need to use to get the most out of thermal therapy.” - *Alicia Kelley*

Christopher Kerr

Currently working as a Biological Scientist IV for the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services Division of Plant Industry (FDACS-DPI) in the Bureau of Methods Development and Biological Control, Chris Kerr is the lead scientist for both the air potato and Asian citrus psyllid biological control programs.



“It’s a lot of fun working with a great group of people on a plethora of production and research projects. It would be much harder without everyone here being so professional, receptive and proactive in their work. No plans to change course in the near future, but I am on the look out for starting up some new biological control programs that would be worthwhile for Florida. I hope to offer future DPM students internships in biological control or mass rearing if anyone is interested .” - *Chris Kerr*

Cory Penca



At the 2016 Southeastern Branch Meeting for the Entomological Society of America, DPM/PhD Student Cory Penca was awarded 2nd Place for the PhD Student Oral Competition. His research project titled, “The Effects of JH Analogues on Diapausing *Halymorpha balys* and *Megacopta cribraria*” discussed the results and potential future applications of insect growth regulators for interference with reproductive diapause, as well as parasitoid rearing and their potential for use in a modified trap-and-kill approach. Cory was presented his award during the Awards Luncheon, by

former SEB-ESA President Dr. Nancy Hinkle.

Any students interested in being featured in the next edition of DPM News can contact the editor, Nicole Casuso at ncasuso@ufl.edu.

Congratulatory Remarks for our Graduate



Congratulations to our **Fall 2015 DPM Graduate Eric LeVeen!**
We wish you the very best!

Dr. Eric Leveen was asked to share a few words regarding his recent graduation and current employment. Below is Dr. LeVeen's reply:

"It seems like yesterday I was plowing the field and growing vegetables for seed and fresh produce back home in South Carolina. I miss those days, and am forever grateful for them. Now graduated from the DPM program, I am again blessed to continue in one of my life long goals of stewardship and protection of our food system. I recently received the honor of being hired with the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS), Division of Plant Industry (DPI) as the state survey coordinator of the Cooperative Agricultural Pest Survey (CAPS) program. I follow in the footsteps of several extraordinary people who have held this position, and who have helped create a legacy of excellence at DPI that I strive to uphold and enhance. Florida has an amazing agricultural community with strong support within academia, industry, government, and the minds and hearts of the public. Through the CAPS program, and future endeavors, I will continue to be a part of protecting our food system.

Current and future students of the DPM program will experience many aspects of the agricultural community. These will not be limited to Florida, but will extend well beyond our state and national boundaries. Professors at the University of Florida, agricultural industry professionals, and government agencies support the DPM program through providing internship training, teaching, and research prospects to students. This support system provides opportunities to gain employable skill sets, exercise practical knowledge in the real world, and expose you to timeless perspectives. I encourage all students to readily engage with this incredible support system, and make the very most of every opportunity you decide to take."

"In the field of observation, chance favors only the prepared mind."
— *Louis Pasteur*

DPMSO - Fundraising

The DPMSO Officers

The Doctor of Plant Medicine Student Organization (DPMSO) hosted its annual Spring Plant Sale two weeks in a row outside of Steinmetz and Fifield Halls. Officers Nicole Casuso, Kayla Thomason, and Ploy Kurdmongkoltham, planted the seeds and cared for hundreds of transplants for this semester's sale. Other students that dedicated their time to help maintain the tables include: Benjamin Waldo, Ariane McCorquodale, Lisbeth Espinosa, Daniel Mancero, Wael Elwakil, John Bonkowski, and Chris Ferguson. Proceeds from the sale will be used to help fund students on a professional field trip next year. At present, the goal destination is Ecuador! We still have money to raise and will be hosting more fundraisers in the near future. A special thank you to Dr. Erickson for allowing us to utilize space in one of his agronomy greenhouses to maintain our seedlings. Thanks also to all of our continued supporters! We cannot succeed without you!

Spring Plant Sale

WHERE

Next to the main parking lot of Steinmetz Hall (Entomology/Nematology Bldg.)

WHEN

Thursday & Friday, April 14 & 15th, 3PM – 6PM

WHAT

Our first crop of spring herbs and vegetables is ready to repot or incorporate into a garden bed!

- Cherry Tomato
- Cilantro
- Sweet Basil
- Mammoth Dill
- Chives
- Limited availability.
- Oregano
- Thyme
- Hot Peppers



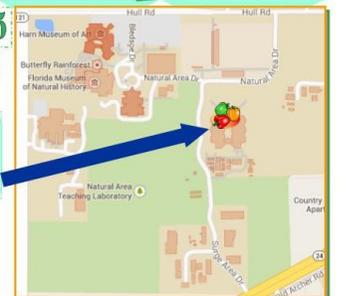
1 for \$3 ~ 2 for \$5

CAMPUS MAP

Not sure where to go?
Check out this [map](#) to see where we will be!

WEBSITE:
<http://dpm.ifas.ufl.edu/>

Event Hosted By:
The University of Florida
Doctor of Plant Medicine
Student Organization



Alumni Spotlight - Dr. Rafael (Andy) Vega *by Nicole Casuso*

Several students were able to meet DPM Program alumnus Dr. Rafael (Andy) Vega this Spring. Dr. Vega visited Gainesville to provide a brief presentation discuss his career as a crop consultant in the Northeast. Afterwards, DPM student Wael Elwakil organized an after work social (*see photo right*) so that students and faculty were able to informally interact with Dr. Vega. During his time in Gainesville, I had the opportunity to interview Dr. Vega in person for this semester's "Alumni Spotlight".

Q. Briefly describe your academic background.

A. I received my B.S. degree in Computer Engineering from Northeastern University. Since I had received my degree in a very different field of science, I completed pre-requisite coursework at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, prior to enrolling in the DPM Program.

Q. What is your current occupation and how has your DPM degree aided you the tasks and responsibilities associated with your position?

A. I currently work as a Crop Consultant, Research Manager, and equal partner of New England Fruit Consultants (NEFCON). Our private company serves five states in the Northeast including Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Hampshire, New York's Hudson Valley, and Vermont. NEFCON provides consulting services for over 5000 acres of tree fruit. I provide consultations for roughly 2000 acres of fruit trees such as apples, peaches, etc. My DPM background in insect identification diagnosis is used on a daily basis. Insect toxicology and a thorough understanding of their metabolic pathways has been especially useful. Key plant pathology concepts and methods that I learned during the disease clinic internship is invaluable with my job. I do approximately 80% of the initial diagnosis. Additional comprehension of disease control and management is critical. Fundamental knowledge of herbicide interactions and their efficacy also plays an important role in the field. Most of the problems we see in orchards are abiotic, due to cultural practices, phytotoxicity, or deficiencies. Currently, I am in my 6th growing season and the diverse skill set I have from my DPM degree continues to give me a competitive advantage in the field. Overall, I enjoy the immediate impact and substantial influence my advice can have at the commercial level.



Q. What prompted you to pursue your present career and where are you located?

A. Since I am originally from New England, the thought of returning there for a career seemed natural. Independent crop consulting is a very unique field with and the Northeast could use the skillset that DPMs are graduating with. My present career offered me independence to make my own schedule and flexible hours to coincide with changing weather patterns. There was a great deal of flexibility, especially during the off season when I have time to attend lots of trainings, meetings, and remain actively engaged with the community and the growers. The consultant position seemed to balance many of my interests in learning, teaching, and conducting self-motivated research.

Q. Why did you choose to enroll in the DPM program?

A. I wanted a multi-disciplinary background that was not restricted to any particular field that I had seen in other programs. I was interested in diagnostic work and definitely wanted to do some research but not exclusively. I also liked the idea of teaching but again, not exclusively. Field work was also a must have, but I didn't want to commit to being a full-time grower or farm manager. The DPM Program encompassed all of my main goals.

Q. How did you find out about the DPM Program?

A. I used to work as a horticulturalist at the Zoo New England. They had insect and disease problems that sparked my interest to look for programs that gave a strong background in IPM. I then found myself caught between working in entomology and pathology. That's when I found the DPM Program.

"The will to win, the desire to succeed, the urge to reach your full potential...these are the keys that will unlock the door to personal excellence."
—Confucius

...continued on next page

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Q. From a personal standpoint, how has your DPM degree influence you?

A. I feel like an ambassador for agriculture and the plant industry in general. Explaining the DPM title itself is actually a really wonderful ice-breaker because it's a way to gauge people's interest and knowledge level of the subject. I've had some really great conversations with people about the program. I have always been passionate about food, how it is made, how it's grown, and industry. Currently I am involved with the [Northeast Organic Farming Association \(NOFA/Mass\)](#). We educate people to help them understand the pesticide/organic controversy. We try to show them the importance of industry as well as consumer education. Explaining the acronym is actually a really wonderful ice-breaker.

Q. Are there any challenges that your DPM degree has helped you overcome?

A. Being prepared for natural disasters and emerging pests and pathogens (i.e. Brown Marmorated Stink Bug or disease outbreaks-) is something the DPM Program definitely helped me with. There is also a type of psychology involved with being a consultant. People skills are crucial. Being able to communicate with researchers and translate that to applicable knowledge for growers and farm workers can often be a difficult challenge. My involvement both during the DPM Program and during my internships has really helped me with this.

Q. Any other words you would like to share with DPM students?

A. I strongly encourage each of you to be active and engaged. Networking cannot be stressed enough. It really is important. Don't be afraid to establish and develop your own niche within the department and the plant industry community!

If the shoe fits... why DPM might be right for you!

By Nicole Casuso

Wondering if the DPM program is a path you might want to pursue? Take this short quiz and see if the shoe fits!

1. Do you seek to become knowledgeable in any of these topics: plant disease or arthropod pest management, agronomy, or horticultural sciences?
2. Are you interested in hands-on experiences that allow you to work in the field and/or in a lab, internships with local businesses or federal agencies, and interdisciplinary studies?
3. Do you aspire to work in academia, industry, extension, or regulatory?
4. Do you enjoy community outreach and extension, networking, and attending professional development workshops, seminars, and scientific conferences?
5. Do you prefer application-based science?

If you answered **yes** to most of the questions listed above, then we highly recommend that you explore your graduate career options with the University of Florida DPM Program!

Plant, Pun, or Puzzle!

Answer:

They *photosynthesize*
with them!

*Already enrolled in a
graduate degree program?*

Contact our program for more
information about
potential dual-enrollment!

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Interested in learning more about our current DPM students?
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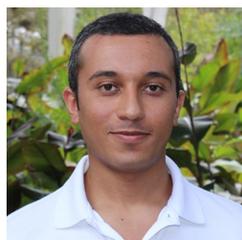
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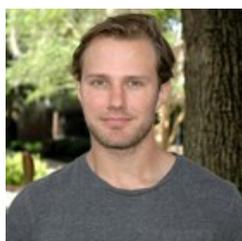
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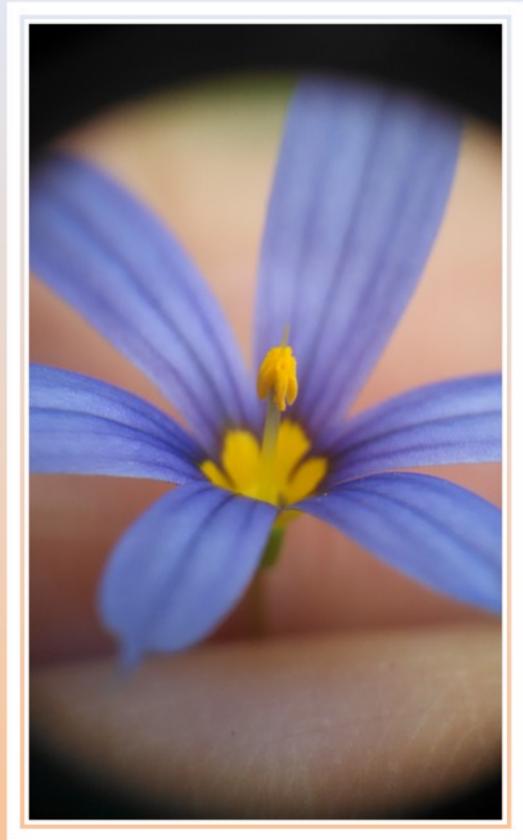
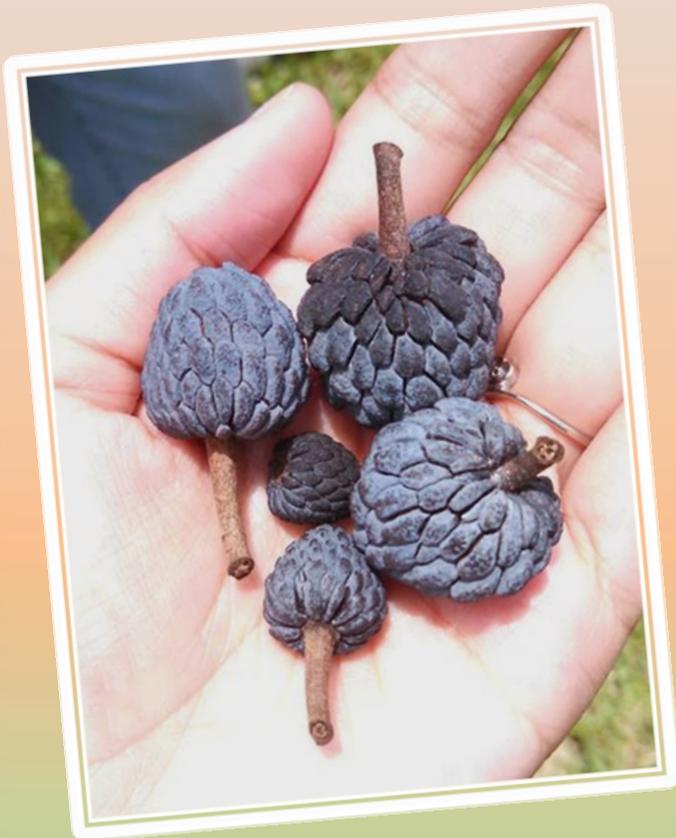


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