During the summer term in 2013, I worked as a gardener in Giverny, France. Giverny is located in the north of France, about an hour by train outside of Paris. I worked as a gardener, tour guide and translator for the Jardin de Monet à Giverny, or the Claude Monet Museum and Gardens. The gardens and museum are the preserved home of Claude Monet and his famed gardens that produced the watercolor paintings of water lilies and the iconic Japanese bridge. The gardens have been restored and preserved exactly as Monet kept them. Here is the view from my post in the garden-

My responsibilities at the garden were to weed, water, and rake the garden before the 10,000 tourists per day arrived. These daily chores started at 5:00 am until the tourists arrived at 8:00. The garden is about an acre in size and is planted in an English style, meaning that there are plants filling every square inch of the garden. This made it difficult to weed, and difficult to complete all the daily tasks before the tourists arrived.

Once tourists arrived, I was responsible for giving tours of the gardens in French, English and in Japanese. This was very challenging, as I had to continuously switch between languages and had to perfect the vocabulary in each language. The names of the flowers were difficult even in English. The tour groups were from all over France and the world, and it was fascinating to hear why they had all chosen to visit Monet’s gardens. The gardens are connected to the museum, which houses a couple hundred original works, as well as, the house itself, which is decorated exactly as Monet left it.

After the tourists left everyday, the head gardener, the other gardeners, and I, were responsible for planning the garden and replanting. The garden is redone every two weeks so that the plants are always in bloom. There are 8 two week long seasons- for example, the irises bloom for two weeks, we then replace
them for poppy season, and then those are replaced by blooming rose bushes. This takes very careful planning so that tourists do not notice a dramatic change, and so that the garden stays exactly how Monet kept it.

The planting and horticulture aspects of the garden were most relatable to my agriculture experience. All the plants for the garden are grown in a greenhouse using hydroponics. The plants are grown, and kept in the garden, without any fertilizer or pesticides. This makes planting challenging because we needed to plant certain varieties next to each other for optimum weed and pest protection. This was closely related to my studies of intercropping and integrated pest management for agricultural crops. Once the planning was finished, we had to carry out the dramatic planting changes during the night, so that the garden was never seen to be under renovation.

The most enjoyable aspect of the summer and of my job was getting to work in such a hands on environment. It was nice to apply what I had learned in horticulture and sustainable agriculture classes in a first hand experience. I got to see how that knowledge could be directly applied, and turned into a beautiful garden. I also loved practicing French and getting to learn more about French culture. The entire summer was spent speaking French with my fellow gardeners and wherever I travelled.

I would highly recommend this program. It is very challenging, and interested students should realize that it is hard physical labor, and that you will be exhausted by the end of your time there. In addition, I would recommend that you apply for this program only if you speak French fluently. It would be too difficult to conduct the tours and to communicate with the other gardeners if you do not speak fluently. Overall though, I learned an immense about how to manage a garden, about proper gardening skills, how to integrate plants to not use fertilizers, about timing plant growth cycles, and also about France and rural French lifestyles. I thoroughly enjoyed my time in Giverny, and I would recommend at least a visit to anyone.