

NIA HILL – November 2017

Nia Hill Wears Multiple Hats As She Shares Love of Plants and People



When Nia Hill was a child living in Boston, her mother planted green bean seeds on their small apartment balcony. Nia carefully watered the seeds every day and was fascinated as she watched them grow to small shoots and eventually to a full plant that produced food she could eat.

That experience sparked something in her that would eventually lead her to a career doing all the things she loved: nurturing, educating, gardening, teaching, and helping people become self-sufficient. “The process of growing food and being able to eat what you’ve grown amazed me throughout my life,” she says. “In my first career in child care, I was always working with kids in gardening projects and putting my hands in dirt here and there.”

When she moved to California seven years ago as a single parent with a baby daughter, Nialeh, she knew the struggle to make ends meet firsthand and realized how many people were hungry and could use help. She started a nonprofit called Nourish Wellness which offered low-cost resources and advice. While doing her research, she came across Merritt’s Landscape Horticulture Program and signed up to take a permaculture class which was perfect for what she wanted to learn and share. She loved the idea of planting in a sustainable way that made the best use of the land.

Merritt soon became her home-away-from-home as she took more classes, and her goal to combine all of the things she loved to do starting falling into place. “I learned how to grow vegetables and edible food in raised beds from Tom Branca in Urban Community Gardening and found out all about Edible Landscaping with Anders Vilstrand, and I love being able to donate the harvested crops to food banks and other non-profit like like Clausen House (for the developmentally disabled) which fit into my personal work.”

When she found out about the department’s semi-annual plant sale, she was eager to help and became a volunteer intern and then a student aide working alongside Science Technician Molly Sealund where she learned about crop production and propagating plants and how to prepare them for sale. It was during that time she became very interested in nursery management and began taking classes. She is now just one class shy from earning her AA degree in that topic (in addition to her AA in Permaculture as well as AAs in General Curriculum and Social and Behavioral Science – and a previous BA in English/Creative Writing from San Francisco State

University). So when an opening came up as a part-time Science Tech/Nursery Manager, she jumped at the chance.

Now Nia can most often be found propagating plants and taking loving care of the ones she has carefully organized into categories for future sale to help fund the department, including vegetables, herbs, natives, ornamental plants, perennial edibles, and succulents. And, as an added bonus to Nia's bucket list of dream jobs, she was given the opportunity to teach "Plant Propagation" this fall and again in the Spring along with the course "Crop Production, Marketing and Sales."

"I've learned so much from the faculty and staff in Landscape Horticulture, and I'm so excited to be able to teach what I've learned to others," says Nia. "Working here touches on everything I've wanted to accomplish in my life that has to do with helping people and allowing them to use resources to help themselves eat and be healthy."

—*Susan May*