



North Carolina State Fair Flower & Garden Show superintendent Dan Danford adjusts a hanging plant at the October 2024 N.C. State Fair. Danford has been the superintendent of the Flower and Garden Show since 2019, but has worked at the fair for about 15 years. As superintendent, Danford is an 8-month employee of the state of North Carolina. Preparation for each year's 11-day state fair begins months in advance, with planting typically starting in June or July. Through meticulous planning, Danford works to ensure that each plant reaches its full bloom during the fair.

Danford stands in front of his awards, including the 2021 North Carolina State Fair Superintendent of the Year Award and two Commissioner of Agriculture Awards. He is holding the 2024 Commissioner of Agriculture Award, which the North Carolina Commissioner of Agriculture later presented to one of the show's competition gardens.







A self-taught gardener with no formal education in horticulture, Danford said he learned through experimentation and spending time with people who could teach him. When he's not at the state fairgrounds, Danford works at Campbell Road Nursery in Raleigh, North Carolina. He does not recall exactly when gardening became a hobby, and says he feels like he has been doing it his whole life. "Gardening is good for the soul," said Danford.

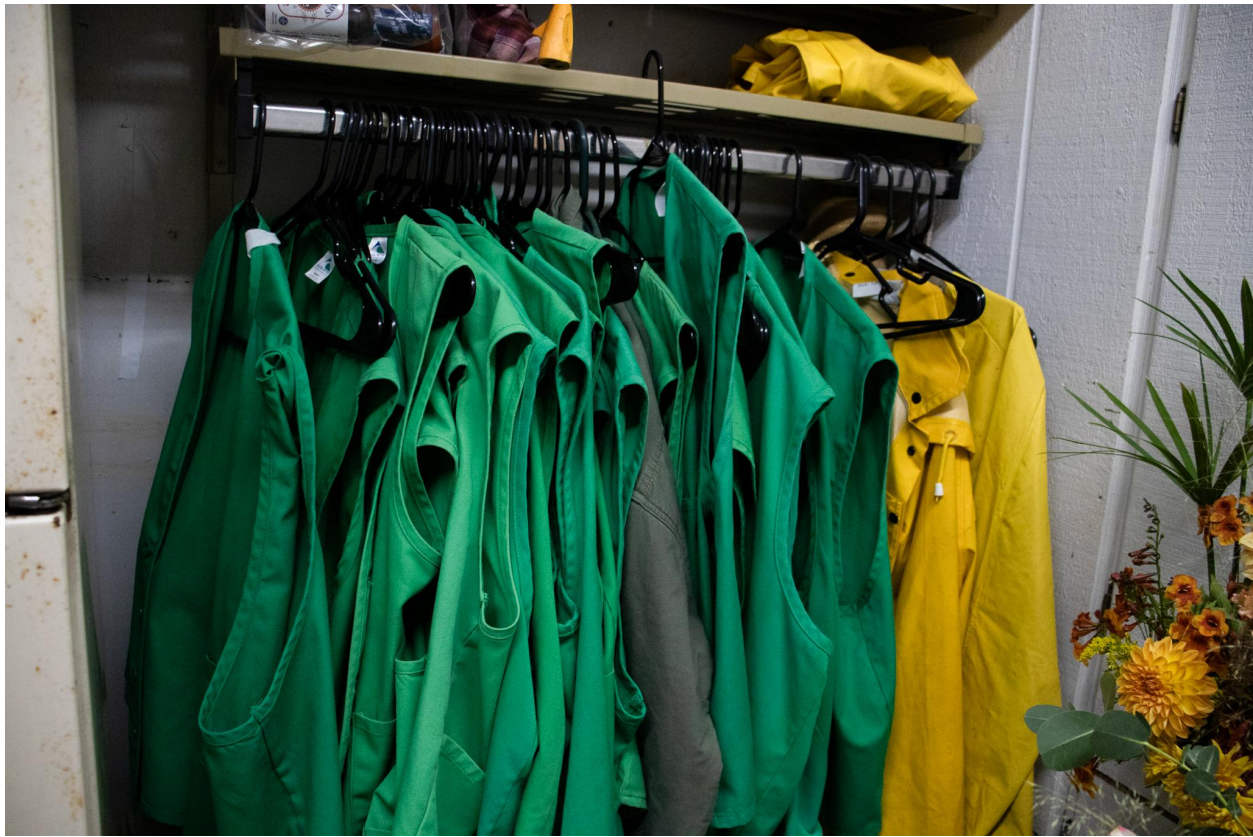


Danford stops to chat with fairgoers in front of the Flower & Garden Show's hallmark mum tree, a staple display of the fair. Danford says the most rewarding part of the fair is the relationships he builds with the Flower and Garden Show visitors, employees and gardeners who participate in the competitions year after year. "You know, I really don't get to enjoy the rest of the fair," said Danford, "but I enjoy being here." He values the Flower and Garden show as an oasis from the regular hustle and bustle of the state fair. "This is the only place [at the fair] where people can stop holding their children's hands," he said.



Danford fixes a trash bag in the Flower & Garden Show. For Danford, one of his top priorities is keeping the Flower & Garden Show clean and well-maintained throughout the duration of the fair. “I hire everyone and do everything I can to keep this place looking like Disneyland through day 11.”





Employee vests hang in the employee break room in the flower barn of the Flower & Garden Show. “What’s cool is my team,” said Danford. “They all want to come back!” Despite their low hourly wage, most of the employees return to work at the Flower & Garden Show each year.





Danford chats with a customer at the Flower & Garden Show's annual mum sale, which takes place the Monday immediately following the closing of each year's state fair. At the sale, the Flower & Garden Show sells all 1500 mums that were a part of its exhibits for \$5 each.

Customers line up at the gate of the Flower & Garden Show before they open at 9 a.m. on the morning of the sale, ready with wagons and carts to load up with mums. "The mum sale is the most bittersweet day for me," said Danford. "You see the mum tree...and then it's gone like that [snaps]."

Danford stands in the now-empty flower barn two weeks after the 2024 N.C. State Fair ends. During the weeks following the fair, Danford prepares for next year by taking down displays and packing them up until they're ready to be used again. The fair's current flower barn, where the flower shows take place, will be torn down and replaced before the 2025 fair.







After 11-days of non-stop work and over 900,000 visitors, Danford looks over an empty fairground. During the first week of the fair, Danford logged 94 hours, and 105 hours during the second week. "Now we get ready for next year," said Danford.