

## **RASHIDAT ALABA YUSUFF**

My journey as an Ambassador of the American Society of Plant Biologists began in January 2025, and it quickly became one of the most defining experiences of my year. I joined with the hope of learning and contributing, but I did not anticipate how deeply the program would shape my confidence, skills, and sense of belonging within the global plant science community. What began as a simple desire to engage more with plant biology grew into a year of mentorship, responsibility, outreach, and personal transformation. Through my activities, I actively supported ASPB's mission of advancing plant science and building inclusive scientific communities, particularly by expanding ASPB's visibility and participation in West Africa.

When I joined the program, my first commitment was to promote the society and its mission within my academic and professional circles. Through my consistent engagement on LinkedIn and by sharing ASPB activities on my social media pages, I created widespread awareness among students, early career researchers, and professionals. Over a thousand people interacted with or became aware of ASPB through these efforts. Many of them had never heard of the society, and being the person who introduced them to such an influential scientific community became very meaningful to me. This awareness extended into the research institute where I currently work as a research intern, National Horticultural Research Institute, where I spoke to more than fifty undergraduate interns about ASPB and its opportunities. Their interest and curiosity reassured me that these conversations were worthwhile. I also introduced directors of research within my institute to ASPB, and this opened new conversations about the importance of global scientific communities. After observing the impact the ambassador program had on my growth, over twenty mentees and colleagues reached out to make enquiries about becoming ambassadors in the coming years. Overall, my outreach activities reached over 1,000 individuals online and more than 100 students and researchers through direct engagement. Seeing this level of interest strengthened my belief that ASPB will gain more recognition and participation from West Africa, specifically, Nigeria.

One of the major responsibilities I had this year was participating in the SURF tracking and profiling project. I was assigned several former SURF participants for tracking and subsequently interviewed four of them for the profiling project. The task required me to search for updated information, reach out to the SURFers or their mentors, schedule interviews, and update the tracking sheet. This was a new experience for me, and it pushed me to develop stronger communication skills. Drafting introduction emails, following up respectfully, and conducting interviews helped me build confidence in my professional interactions. Some of the past SURFers I contacted later viewed my online profile and sent encouraging messages. Their kindness came at moments when I was overwhelmed with graduate school preparation, and their words became a quiet source of strength. Through this project, I learned how to manage tasks that required patience, clarity, and attention to detail.

My personal growth this year was supported by the incredible individuals I met within the ASPB community. The mentorship I received made a significant difference in my academic and professional journey. Asha Kumari offered continuous support as I prepared my graduate school applications, reviewing materials and giving thoughtful feedback. Aruna Kilaru provided mentorship through Zoom meetings and document reviews, and her guidance helped me improve the quality of my applications. Jayneen Brayneen helped refine my blurb in a calm and encouraging

manner, which made the writing process less stressful and gave me more confidence in my communication skills. Shoshana supported me in countless ways, including informing me about the ambassador mentor-mentee program, providing information whenever I needed it, and guiding me through the different expectations of the ambassador role. Through these relationships, I learned the true meaning of diversity. Even though we come from different countries, cultures, and scientific backgrounds, we share one identity as plant biologists. Their willingness to help reminded me that science thrives in community, and that growth often comes through collective support.

The ASPB Ambassador Travel Grant was life-changing, as it gave me hope of attending my first international scientific conference. Although I was ultimately unable to attend the Plant Biology meeting in Milwaukee in person due to financial constraints, I followed the conference closely through ASPB updates by *Plantae*. Even from afar, the experience felt meaningful and reinforcing. Sharing the conference highlights with my network sparked interest among students and colleagues, many of whom expressed a desire to attend future ASPB meetings. Knowing that my experience could influence others was deeply fulfilling and felt like a confirmation that my role as an ambassador was making a difference. I look forward to attending the next meeting in Ontario in 2026.

Throughout the year, the ambassador program helped me strengthen skills that I once struggled with. Before joining, I did not enjoy tasks such as scheduling, writing emails, or organizing meetings. Through ambassador duties, these tasks became natural to me. I now plan meetings with ease, write clear emails, and follow up professionally without hesitation. These skills have supported my graduate school applications and even improved my work as a research intern. I also became more comfortable engaging with people across different time zones and cultural backgrounds. Speaking with former SURF participants, mentors, researchers, and fellow ambassadors made me more confident in my ability to represent myself professionally.

Going forward, as an ambassador in the coming year, I plan to deepen the impact of my outreach. I hope to organize awareness sessions in universities and research institutes across Nigeria, targeting students who could benefit from early exposure to ASPB. I also intend to revive a science sensitization program for high school students. Although the program could not hold earlier this year due to scheduling issues at the school, I am committed to revisiting it. Introducing plant science to younger students is something I care about strongly, and I believe the program will create lasting interest in scientific careers. I also hope to mentor aspiring ambassadors and continue contributing to the SURF profiling project until all my assigned tasks are completed. Additionally, I would like to write reflective pieces for *Plantae* or ASPB platforms, sharing my experience as a young plant biologist from Nigeria.

Becoming an ASPB Ambassador has been one of the best parts of my year. The program offered me mentorship, support, and opportunities that expanded my worldview. It allowed me to grow academically, professionally, and personally. More importantly, it allowed me to give back by promoting plant biology, supporting younger scientists, and creating awareness about the society in my community. I am grateful for every part of this journey, and I look forward to contributing even more meaningfully in the coming year if given the opportunity.