

December 27, 2025

Dr. Jan Leach
Associate Dean for Research, CAS
Colorado State University
Fort Collins, CO 80523

Dear Dr. Leach,

Please accept this letter of application for the position of department head of Horticulture and Landscape Architecture (HLA) at Colorado State University. HLA is especially significant to me because it is the department where I earned both my B.S. and Ph.D. degrees, and it is also where I started my academic career as a research associate. It would be an honor to return and lead the department into its promising future. I currently serve as the department head of Horticulture and Natural Resources (HNR) at Kansas State University. I have led the department for a total of seven years, having begun as interim head in October 2018 before being named permanent head in August 2020. Serving as department head of HNR has been both challenging and rewarding—it is a unique, diverse department consisting of faculty, staff, and students in three disciplines not often found in the same unit, yet we are bound together through our love of nature. I have enjoyed the opportunity to lead and support the great people of HNR as we strive to serve our constituents and advance knowledge in our respective fields. Like Colorado State University, Kansas State is a land-grant institution, and my history here has given me deep familiarity with the three missional areas of land-grants: I was initially hired as an extension specialist (80% extension/20% research) and worked in that role for several years before transitioning into an 80% teaching/20% research position, which I held for the majority of my career, attaining the rank of full professor in 2012. I believe my experience working in and leading this department has prepared me well to lead the Department of Horticulture and Landscape Architecture at Colorado State.

To further address the required qualifications for the position, I have maintained a consistent record of scholarly achievement in all aspects of my appointment throughout my career. I have taught 13 different courses (6 were similar in content to previous courses but reorganized into new formats/course numbers), receiving mean “teacher effectiveness” ratings of 4.5/5.0. I have received teaching awards from both my university and two national associations. On a 20% research appointment, I served as major professor to seven graduate students, all of whom graduated and published their work, and as committee member to 17 other students. In collaboration with my students and colleagues, I was author/co-author of 45 peer-reviewed publications. I have remained active during my time as department head by co-advising one graduate student and serving on the committees of several others. I have engaged with industry professionals, associations, and stakeholders over the course of my career; most closely in my area of turfgrass management, but in a supportive role with many other groups in my role as department head (e.g., urban food systems, green industry groups, greenhouse, natural resource agencies). These associations have involved helping procure research funding (e.g., \$1.2M over the last 15 years from the Kansas Turfgrass Foundation), cooperating on educational conferences, symposiums, and other programs, and numerous consultations and speaking engagements.

The required qualifications also include leadership experience—I have had the privilege of serving in many leadership roles during my career. Recent examples to highlight include participation on the Dean’s leadership team alongside other department heads and administrators; the Greenhouse leadership team (i.e., working with two fellow department heads and a faculty task force to restructure and improve greenhouse operations); chairing the advisory panel for a department head’s 5-year administrative review; being appointed by our Dean to serve on two college-level planning committees charged with guiding impactful change in our rapidly evolving digital age; and recently serving a three-year term on the college promotion and tenure committee. These are just a few examples; over the years I have held a variety of leadership and service roles at the departmental, university, and national levels which are listed in my curriculum vitae.

Regarding the preferred qualifications for the position, I have seven years of experience administering a department with three distinct academic foci (horticulture, park management, and wildlife), 22 faculty, 27 support staff, and 240 students, including 51 graduate students. The department has a \$3.9M annual budget, and includes faculty on the main campus in Manhattan, research/extension centers in Olathe and Wichita, and the K-State Olathe campus. When I assumed the role of interim department head, the department was in a period of crisis, with the faculty having lost trust in the previous head and the business office in disarray. We are in a much better place today, and we got here by working as a team. As Department Head, my approach is to be transparent and to work collaboratively to solve problems and advance our mission. An example from my first year leading the department will help illustrate my leadership style: Five months after I became interim head, I had to decide how to meet a 10% budget cut. I was still learning about our budget, and unfortunately, we had a new business manager who was struggling and unable to give much help. My approach was to consult the College fiscal officer to quickly learn the details of our budget (I included our business manager in the meetings so she could learn alongside me), and then to decide how to meet the budget cut in consultation with a core group of faculty who had the trust of the department. This helped the rest of the faculty and staff feel represented in the process. Open communication and positivity were critical in helping our faculty and staff navigate that situation.

A few further achievements that relate to the preferred qualifications include: 1) The reorganization of our business and human resource operations, both of which are now functioning very effectively; 2) The establishment of online certificates in landscape horticulture, therapeutic horticulture, and controlled environment agriculture, with production horticulture and park management coming on line over the next two years (these certificates consist of 14-15 credit hours and will eventually be stackable into a fully online horticulture degree program); 3) Renovation of our teaching spaces; 4) Establishing a new Recruiting Coordinator position for our department; 5) Currently working with other department heads and faculty to restructure and improve our greenhouse operations.

The preferred qualifications also include mentorship and professional development of faculty and staff. Due to a number of retirements over the last 7 years, our team has become much younger; for example, 14 of our 22 faculty are currently assistant professors, teaching assistant professors, or instructors. One of the most rewarding aspects of my position is the opportunity to

mentor and help these young faculty get off to a great start in their career. At the same time, our more seasoned faculty, and our staff, need professional development opportunities as well, and I enthusiastically support and encourage those experiences. Along those lines, I hosted a lunch hour book study last semester in which we read and discussed the book “Mapping Your Academic Career”. It was well-received, and I’m planning another book discussion this spring. That’s just one small example that demonstrates my personal interest in growing throughout our careers—there are many other excellent opportunities available to our faculty and staff, both on campus and nationally, and I support those every chance I get.

Finally, an effective leader must be an excellent communicator, advocate, and liaison between the department’s faculty/staff and the College leadership. I believe communication is one of my strengths, especially the ability to listen and relate well with all our team members, and to encourage, motivate, and inspire them in a spirit of humility.

My sincere thanks to you and the search committee for considering my application for this important position. I would welcome the opportunity to further discuss how my background, experiences, and interests have prepared me to lead the Department of Horticulture and Landscape Architecture at Colorado State University. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,



Steve Keeley
Professor and Department Head
Department of Horticulture and Natural Resources
Kansas State University