

To

Date

Tuesday October 25, 2005
2 pages from Mario Lanthier

BALL INTERNATIONAL PLUG & CUTTING CONFERENCE

This conference was organized by Ball Publishing and held September 25 to 28 in Detroit, Michigan. The conference is held every year but the crop focus returns every 3 years (2006 will be on perennials, 2007 on bedding plants, 2008 again on plugs).

Attendance was 750 persons, mostly greenhouse growers from the United States (few government or university personnel) and 12% attending from 21 other countries. Registered from British Columbia were West Creek Farms, Valleybrook Gardens and Rainbow Greenhouses. There was a fair contingent from the Prairies, including Holes Greenhouses, Greenview Nurseries, High Greenhouses and DayGrow Greenhouses.

Comments

1) *This was an excellent conference that delivered a high level of technical information.*

- Many presentations were on topics being discussed over the past 2 years at Byland's.
- Some "veterans" of this conference complained of little new information.
- Thank you to Byland's Nurseries for covering my registration and travel expenses.

2) *Scientists attached to this group have defined each step of greenhouse production.*

- For each step, scientists tested the variables and determined "the best practice".
- Each production decision is based on available scientific information, little guessing.
- The end result is a formal process similar to manufacturing, but for greenhouse plants.

3) *There were 4 tracks of simultaneous talks at this conference.*

- Plant production such as light, temperature, growth regulators. This was my #1 focus.
- Pest management. The three talks were disappointing and behind Europe's practices.
- Growing media and nutrition. I could not attend. Emphasis was on pH and EC testing.
- Inventory management. I could not attend. Currently the "hot" issue (bar coding)

TOUR OF GREENHOUSES

C. Raker & Sons, Inc (Litchfield, Michigan)

Specializes in production of plugs and liners.

- 1) 180 million plugs and liners on 11 acres, 73 full-time + 30 students + 88 seasonal.
- 2) Described by Ball Publishing as one of “America’s Five Best Plug Growers” (with Tagawa Greenhouses in Denver, Wagner’s Greenhouses in Minneapolis, Suncoast Greenhouses in Florida, and state-of-the art 6-acre facility of Knox Nursery in Orlando).
- 3) We were 8 hours at this site over 2 different days. The facilities are 20-years old, all “best management practices” are fully implemented, not one weed on site, seed germination is excellent, plant quality is uniform, all growers appear very competent.
- 4) Technology in use: bar coding (each tray and greenhouse area have barcode numbers recorded by wireless scanners) and rolling benches (trays are moved from one growing greenhouse to the next stage greenhouse by rolling rather than hand-lifting).
- 5) Definitely a must-visit to get a view of “what’s best” in greenhouse production.

Four Star Greenhouses (Carleton, Michigan)

Supplies liners and young plants for the Proven Winners program.

- 1) 12 acres of greenhouses + 3 acres of field, 150 to 250 employees.
- 2) Technology: bar coding, Wireless Information System (tying plant, client, sprays).
- 3) Flood floors, possibly less labor-intensive and more uniform than rolling benches for watering, however it requires water treatment and hand-lifting of trays for shipping.
- 4) Worth a visit, the facility is set-up like a hospital, spotless clean, strict sanitation.

Bordine Nursery Ltd (Rochester Hills, Michigan)

The greenhouse production is strictly to service the 4-location garden centers.

- 1) 21 acres, 700 employees in May, \$25 million annual sales, 30K seedling flats.
- 2) Technology: rolling benches, floor flooding, magnetic bar coding.
- 3) Boom watering is programmed using the magnetic bar codes (for example, boom is instructed to water only begonias, not verbena, and will tell by bar codes on trays).

The Blackmore Company (Belleville, Michigan)

This manufacturing plant has 2 main specialties.

- 1) Greenhouse trays: recycled and new plastic are mixed to minimize input cost yet provide a rigid finished wall, then heat-molded into trays, flats, Ellepot liners, etc.
- 2) Greenhouse equipment: a small team is charged with design and customizing specialized equipment such as tray fillers, cylinder sowers, tray cell filling, etc.