At the Canadian Greenhouse Conference

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While their southern neighbors reeled with the stock market crisis in early October, Canadian growers gathered in Toronto, Ontario, for the 30th Annual Canadian Greenhouse Conference, where the opening general session set a cautionary economic mood.

Addressing attendees at the Canadian Greenhouse Conference in October, Larry Schembri, chief of the International Department for the Bank of Canada, put it simply: “The global economy is approaching a recession.”

Nonetheless, with attendance figures trending slightly below previous years, those growers, retailers, landscapers and others who did attend kept the trade show floor and 185 exhibitors busy, and they were equally zealous in attending seminar sessions—from crop culture to mixed containers and energy efficiency.

Sustainability held a central focus in many of the educational seminars, with a standing-room-only keynote address by Dr. Patrick Moore. A former Greenpeace activist, Dr. Moore surprised many in the audience, as he distanced his current thinking from extreme environmentalism—which can often be anti-human, anti-technology, anti-trade and anti-globalization, he noted. Instead, he encouraged “sensible environmentalism” with his practical, science-based look at the global environment and economy.

In regards to many of the platforms we often associate with environmentalism, Dr. Moore stated, “I think a lot of this stuff is put into this narrow, emotional sense.” Instead, he encouraged audience members to question assumptions and examine all the facts. He challenged assumptions as to the cause and severity of global warming, but made it clear that regardless, energy in all its forms needs to be addressed. With 86% of the world energy needs currently being met by fossil fuels (petroleum, natural gas, coal), 6.6% by nuclear power and 6.7% by hydro power, it doesn’t take much calculating to realize that with fossil fuels being in limited supply, alternatives will be necessary.

Bringing it down to the horticulture level, your author, along with U.S. growers Mark Elzinga of Elzinga Greenhouses and Lloyd Traven of Peace Tree Farms covered the grower and garden center angles of sustainability.

Elzinga’s, you might recall, entered the certified organic market last spring, and they’ve invested heavily in
solar and geothermal, among other technologies. (Read the March 2008 issue of GrowerTalks for the backstory.) As always, Elzinga’s is moving forward and there are new details to report. For one, they’re a huge fan of compost tea applications, which they implemented for their organic crops, and they’re now transitioning it over to their conventionally grown crops as well. With one application per week, they’re seeing excellent results, including helping out their pest and disease management program.

Recycling has become a big component at Elzinga’s as well. They teamed up with retailer Meijer and container manufacturer East Jordan Plastics this year to initiate a pot recycling program. In addition, they plan to imprint each pot with “Please Recycle,” the correct plastic type (5, 7, etc.), and “Made from recycled plastic.”

Peace Tree Farms also worked with East Jordan Plastics on a recycling program; they’ll be sending 16 skids of plastic pots to East Jordan for recycling this year. Lloyd also noted that they’re offering customers a rebate of 5 cents on every tray they return. Customers think it’s a great bonus, and Lloyd reuses those trays (and he thinks it’s a fine deal, too).

Ever wonder what to do with all that cardboard? Elzinga’s bought a compactor to bale leftover boxes, selling the material to a recycler who pays them for the cardboard. “In a three- to four-year period, we will pay for that compactor,” he says.

Mark also stressed, “The only way for us to be a sustainable business is to be a profitable business.”