

# GROWERTALKS

## Features

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## Conferences: Plugging Away in Orlando

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There's something about the anticipation and excitement that comes from only holding an event once every three years that gives *GrowerTalks* Plug & Cutting Conference an aura that's not duplicated at any other industry event that we know of. The air almost hums with energy in the workshops, conference rooms, trade show hall and tour stops.

Or maybe it's the excellent seminar schedule put together by Roger Styer, our host and facilitator for the event since the '80s when he began working with Dr. David Koranski, the founder the original Plug Conference that would eventually morph into today's world-class event.

Or maybe it's the high level of attendee the conference attracts—again, because they know it's their only chance for the next three years to network with so many like-minded growers and business owners (540 attendees from 38 states and 14 countries).

For these reasons and more, Orlando was the gathering place of the plug and cutting world in late September, when OFA—An Association of Floriculture Professionals helped Ball Publishing host another successful conference focused specifically on the topic of plugs and cuttings.

### **The workshops**

The four-day event kicked off after a 30-minute bus ride to Knox Nursery, which served our home away from home for the event. Bruce and Monty Knox and their crew went above and beyond for our workshops and our post-conference tour ... just as they did for the 2002 event (2005's Plug Conference was in Detroit, Michigan, as you may recall).

Workshops included Stage 0 and Seeder; Beginner Plug Grower; and Beginner Cutting Grower. Instructors included Roger Styer, consultant Ron Derrig, Knox Nursery's Mary Zubrod-Pinkham, Ball's Jim Kennedy, Fafard's Jamie Gibson and Knox's Doug Carpenter.

What was most interesting about the "beginner workshops" was how many attendees were hardly

beginners—we saw several veterans in the group who were simply looking for a refresher course. We also noted one cutting expert who wanted to expand his knowledge of seed propagation.

There were hundreds of tips and ideas to be found during the day-long workshops, but beginner plug grower tips from Roger Styer include water management on petunias and begonias—the two extremes in water requirements. Petunia plugs, he says, want to start out “medium wet” until the cotyledons are spread open—about day 8—and then they want to dry down for a week to get their roots down to the bottom of the cell. “You’ve got to learn how to really go dry with them,” Roger stressed. “But trust me, you won’t kill them.” Begonias, to the contrary, have shallow roots, and you have to manage the surface moisture carefully, avoiding being “heavy handed” with the hose, which will also help prevent algae. “If you master petunias and begonias, you’re a good plug grower,” he told his group.

Another tip from Roger was about PGRs for cosmos and other tall-growing varieties such as tall celosia, tall snapdragons and zinnia. He suggests you “sprench” them with paclobutrazol just 24 hours after sowing. PPM depends upon your sprench volume, but 1 to 5 ppm is the typical range.

Mary Zubrod-Pinkham of Knox Nursery warned growers during her workshop to be especially watchful for fungus gnats on uncovered (non-topdressed) plugs. She called the accessible organic matter “a buffet” for them. Treatments include NemaShield, Adept and Citation.

Doug Carpenter from Knox discussed sticking cuttings in the Beginner Plug Grower Workshop. Knox uses the plastic stick from small marker flags as dibbles for their Ellepots. Doug says to measure up just 3/8 in. from the end, and wrap the stick with several layers of tape at that point to indicate the depth. The cutting should be stuck in just far enough to keep it upright.

### **The seminars**

Highlights from our seminar program include Dr. Will Healy from Ball and Peter Byrne from British greenhouse Bordon Hill Nursery talked about tips for improving the post-harvest of plugs. Will stressed that the “tone” of a plug or cutting is a balance between light, temperature, fertilizer and moisture management. If one factor changes, another factor has to adjust to compensate for it. Peter took us on a pictorial tour of Bordon Hill, where we saw that they “build” carts for every order, carefully setting shelves to specific spacings to maximize loads. If they went with one generic cart shelf setup for everything, Peter says, they’d probably lose 50% space efficiency on their carts.

A highlight of the conference had to be Bill Swanekamp of Kube-Pak who spoke on “The New Economics of Propagation & Production.” Bill stressed the “new” in the talk, as “the old economics just aren’t working anymore.”

Always a master of the numbers, Bill has taken his cost accounting to a new extreme by discovering that his million-square-foot greenhouse actually has 52 million square feet available when calculated on a per-week basis. After all, he calculates overhead on a per-week basis—so why not his available space? So starting this spring, each week he calculated how much of each bay was filled and used that to come up with weekly space utilization averages—which came out to around 64.5% during January-May. Now he’s using that number to calculate his production costs and profit—and he’s found he’s not making as much as he thought.

What's that mean? We need to sell more during the shoulder seasons," he says. "And we need to raise our prices," he added, speaking not just of Kube-Pak, but of the industry.

While the crop culture sessions drew some of the heaviest crowds, it wasn't all about crop culture. We also offered a session on employee culture. Yasmin Metivier spoke on "Understanding & Motivating Your Latino Workforce." Her first question was a simple one: What's the difference between Hispanic and Latino? No one in the audience could answer. "Hispanic is not a race, it's an ethnic group," she replied, which came from the government Census Bureau and applies to anyone who comes from a Spanish-speaking country. Latino, to the contrary, describes anyone who comes from Latin America.

### **The Tours**

The chance to visit other businesses is one of the attractions of any good conference program, and the Plug & Cutting Conference was no different. However, rather than focus specifically on plug or cutting facilities, we mixed it up with a variety of Florida producers. Our Apopka tour featured Agristarts' tissue culture lab, Deroose Plants, Hermann Engelmann Greenhouses and Knox Nursery. The three busloads of attendees saw how cutting-edge producers handle tropical foliage and flowering plants in the challenging climate of Florida.

Our second tour headed north to Gainesville, where a smaller group visited Hatchet Creek Farms, Robrick Nursery and the University of Florida Young Plant Research Program. On this tour they saw a combination of "lower-tech" operations along with the high-end of university research.