OFA Short Course: Aisles of Smiles

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Sticking with our weather theme, it’s easy to use the annual summer OFA Short Course as a barometer of the industry. You can tell a lot about how spring went by the mood of the attendees and exhibitors ... or can you? This spring rated about a five or six by most accounts, thanks to a strong start that was ruined by a hot, wet finish. And yet the mood in the aisles at July’s Short Course was decidedly upbeat and optimistic. Attendees we spoke with chalked it up to thinking long-term. To paraphrase one grower, “Sure, spring wasn’t great. But it could have been worse. We still need to plan for fall, and next season. If you don’t invest, you fall behind.”

Investment seemed to be on many minds. Exhibitors promoting energy and labor efficiency reported considerable interest in their products. However, they weren’t yet sure if growers would pull the trigger on contracts. Said one exhibitor, of the conservative nature of growers, “They’ve got a little money in their pockets from spring, but they may want to hold on to it, seeing how uncertain the economy still is.”

Another barometric reading from Short Course: Increased interest in retail. More and more growers are focusing on retail, whether they’re already retail growers, are considering starting a retail location, or they’re interested in better serving their IGC or chain store customers. Mirroring that trend, OFA is making a concerted effort to attract more retailers to the show by providing more retail content. Two features were designed specifically for retailers: the second annual Merchandising Contest; and the Garden Center Live! Interactive retail display area, designed and hosted by four retail magazines, including Green Profit (read about both events below).

Finally, what about attendance? Well, it was up from last year, organizers say, with some 9,000 total industry folks registered, representing 32 countries. However, that’s down from previous highs of more than 10,000. Why? Simple: the industry isn’t as big as it used to be. Consolidation and the loss of businesses through retirement and land sales. There just aren’t as many of us as their used to be.

But those of you still growing and retailing are doing a better job than ever, and you’re probably better business people than your predecessors, too. That’s why, despite the challenges of the market, the economy and a changing society, you’re still positive about the future. In fact, more than a few attendees speculated that the reason the mood on the trade show floor was so upbeat was because the gloom-and-doomers all stayed home.
That said, here’s a sampling of the products, ideas and trends from the 2010 OFA Short Course. Oh, if you’re planning for next summer, mark your calendars for July 9-12, in Columbus, Ohio.

What’s New?
In between meeting with people, attending sessions and trying to spend some time in our own booth, we dedicated a few hours each day to wandering down all (and yes, we mean ALL) of the aisles on the trade show floor. Here are a few noteworthy products and programs we saw while maneuvering through the eager attendees.

One Way Display  The One Way Display is a new product from first-time OFA exhibitor Technopos Inc. of Quebec, Canada. This recycled cardboard shipping and display unit is designed for one-way plant shipments. Made of sturdy recycled paperboard that’s held in place with plastic strapping, each shelf can hold up to 200 lbs. of bedding or pot plants.

There’s also a cut flower version available. Techno POS can custom print the uprights, shelves and headers with slogans or POP of your choice. The One Way Display comes in full-size or half pallet sizes. Retailers can easily break down the rack for recycling after use. Cost is about $40—price-competitive with EZ Shipper racks. Technopos previously has developed in-store displays for the cosmetics and pharmaceuticals industries. They’ve been testing the One Way Display in a few select Walmart and Sam’s Club stores. www.onewaydisplay.com

Netherland Bulb Co.  Touted as “the world’s largest colocasia,” Colocasia gigantea Thailand strain is a monstrosity of a tropical that grows up to 10-ft. tall, with leaves measuring 6 ft. across. It wouldn’t have been believable if there weren’t a picture of Jeroen Menkveld’s wife standing next to one.

This Colocasia gigantea is derived from a Thailand strain and is grown into plugs from seeds the size of a pinhead. It’s a heavy feeder, but Jeroen said it’ll grow like crazy if you keep on fertilizing it. Also, the bigger the pot, the bigger the plant. www.netherlandbulb.com

Dramm  Dramm’s booth was buzzing with visitors getting glimpses of their new watering and spray tools, the first of which is the new BP-4 Battery Powered Back Pack Sprayer. Kurt Becker told us it’s lightweight and easy to use for applying PGRs, insecticides, fungicides and other greenhouse and nursery chemicals.

Kurt also showed us their new ozone water management system, which collects water runoff from the greenhouse and cleans it so it can be reused. Using green food coloring, he demonstrated how the ozone uses an organic process that filters the water by adding more oxygen. www.dramm.com

A-ROO  The booth alone was reason enough to go in and check out their new packaging products. A-ROO’s Dennis Debaltzo walked us through a few new innovations for the floral industry, including the Petal Pouch Gift Bag that features different decorative patterns, making a plant an instant, wrapped gift. They also have a large Petal Pouch for flats and trays. For the consumer who wants
more than one plant, the Gift Tote is made with a thicker plastic to help carrying multiple plants easier. There is also a slimmer version for orchids. [www.a-roo.com](http://www.a-roo.com)

**Casa Flora** Richard Lim, president of Casa Flora, was pleased to show off his new “extra-hardy” fern, Astral Gem. Richard says it’s so tough that it withstands the trials of both pets and kids. And the rugged, shiny, dark-green finely cut foliage doesn’t spore, so it won’t make a mess on tables and furniture. Also, Richard is partnering with Edmundo Ortega, a Maryland designer who creates living walls with built-in irrigation systems from ferns and heucheras, to provide them to Casa Flora customers. Richards says that usually green walls tend to be very expensive, but not so with Edmundo’s creations, who has developed living displays for the Baltimore Conservatory and office buildings in Maryland. [www.casaflora.com](http://www.casaflora.com)

**MasterTag** With the plight of honeybees making headlines, MasterTag has developed a program specifically to support our pollinating pals. Beeology allows growers and retailers to easily create a program of plants that attract honeybees. In-store signage and tags inform the consumer about how they can help honeybees thrive … MasterTag even offers honey made from their own hives. A sweet deal! [www.mastertag.com](http://www.mastertag.com)

**Northwest Horticulture** Echinacea Hot Summer is one of the new varieties from Northwest Horticulture. Exclusive to them, Hot Summer features big flowers that start out orange then change to a brick red as they age. Hardy to Zone 5, Hot Summer is great for 1 to 2 gal. pots. Start in the fall with a 72 cell and sell the next spring for the largest plants, or plant a 36 cell in early spring for summer flowering. [www.northwesthort.com](http://www.northwesthort.com)

**Syngenta Crop Protection** Palladium is the latest fungicide from Syngenta Crop Protection. Labeled for botrytis and other foliar and stem diseases, Palladium offers a dual mode of action—both contact and systemic. It’s active ingredient, cyprodinil, has a new systemic mode of action that works within the plants tissues by inhibiting disease penetration and reproduction. Its second AI, fludioxonil, provides contact and residual protection on the plant surface. [www.greencastonline.com](http://www.greencastonline.com)
Head-Turning Displays
There were a few booths that went way above and beyond the same old backdrop and table display … ones that had you asking people, “Did you check out that booth with the cool …?”

From Delicate to Industrial  A-ROO’s booth was a real head turner. On the outside were rows of tissue paper in an array of colors surrounding “window displays” showcasing their different packaging options. Inside, was a more modern, industrial lounge area with black leather chairs, marble-topped tables and walls made of plastic plug trays (that you can also buy from A-ROO).

Sakata’s “Store”  To highlight the retail appeal of their varieties, including cut flowers, Sakata went with an upscale grocery store look using actual grocery store fixtures in a dark cherry finish.

World Cup Fever  What was FIFA thinking, scheduling the World Cup Final smack-dab in the middle of America’s biggest horticultural industry trade show? Considering that the Netherlands was one of the teams battling for the cup and there are many Dutch exhibitors (and soccer supporters), there was a sea of orange throughout the trade show floor. Some showed their favoritism by decorating their booths—like Plants Nouveau did with its mannequin—while a few went as far as “closing” their booths completely to head offsite to watch the game. To avoid a totally deserted show, a few enterprising exhibitors—including GrowerTalks| Green Profit—showed the game on TVs in their booths. We’re happy to report that Spain’s victory didn’t affect the mood of the Dutch fans during the rest of the show … well, not much anyway.

Striking Succulents  EuroAmerican’s classy, modern succulent containers offered unique ideas on how to display them using a variety of textures and colors beyond the been-there, done-that Southwestern themes often used with these drought-tolerant plants.

Consistency is Key  Dutch gerbera producer Lekkerkerk Plants chose a great way to show off a display that only featured one crop. Every container was silver, complementing the bright colors of the gerberas.
Design Stars
Great retail merchandising takes a designer’s eye, a builder’s skill, and a pioneer’s resourcefulness. The contestants taking part in the second annual Merchandising Contest showed all these attributes—and then some—when it was their turn to create a themed display in just 60 minutes.

Compared to last year’s contest, the 2010 contestants worked with all the same materials during their respective rounds, and learned of their display theme and design objects just an hour before the crafting began. Sunday morning’s Round 1 pitted Beth Harris (The Garden Gates, Louisiana) against Heather Wissink (Alden Lane Nursery, California), with Heather winning the Fantastic Foliage-themed round. Sunday afternoon’s Round 2 saw Barbara Matone (Matterhorn Nursery, New York) compete against Abby Thompson (Meadow View Gardens, Ohio), with Abby taking the Summer Sizzle-themed round.

Abby and Heather duked it out in Monday’s Destination Backyard Staycation-themed finals. Both created vignettes worthy of inclusion in the best garden centers; however, the Merchandising Contest judges declared Abby the winner for her display’s shopability and overall design.

Spectators and passersby alike not only rooted on the competitors, they also picked up a few secrets of great merchandising. Sure, the competition is a fun event, but the OFA organizers hoped the displays, which remained standing until the last day of the Short Course, would be learning tools for others charged with visual merchandising responsibilities.

And, by the way, we’re proud to say Abby represented Green Profit in this contest that pitted four garden center trade magazines against each other. Congratulations on your victory, Abby!

What’s New for Retail?
OFA Short Course is by no means just for growers. We spotted several vendors offering up goods for the retail-minded attendee. Here is a sampling of what we found.

**John Henry**  Being a tag company, the John Henry Co. has a treasure trove of plant information. Rather than use it only for tags, they decided to it was time to put this gardening information to an additional use. So, they created the BloomIQ.com website and associated the site with QR (“quick response”) codes that are printed onto plant tags. Shoppers can snap a photo of this QR code with a smart phone and be taken directly to the appropriate page on the BloomIQ mobile site to find out more about the plant. Gardeners can also create or find collections based on color, conditions, season and so on. Right now BloomIQ is just flowers, but veggies are in the works. BloomIQ.com officially launched August 1. [www.jhc.com](http://www.jhc.com)
Bartlett Bench & Wire  Watering plants at retail has its risks—plant damage, overwatering, underwatering, hoses in customers’ paths, puddles, slick spots … . Bartlett Bench & Wire has developed the Freedom Flood Bench line of sub-irrigation retail benches to help alleviate these problems. Run by a battery powered timer and solenoid, these benches can also help eliminate missed waterings.  www.bbwire.com

Ball Horticultural Company  The Burpee Garden Coach is a mobile web tool that assists home veggie gardeners via text and web-based interactions through the entire gardening season. Whether it’s help with choosing the proper plants, determining care, or how to harvest, the Garden Coach can lend a hand. Gardeners can receive timely gardening reminders via text, have access to Burpee Home Gardens variety info, access weather reports, and document their gardening success in their own online journal. There’s even a function for them to find local retailers of Burpee Home Gardens products. The Burpee Garden Coach is still in its testing phase now, but the mobile web tool be ready to officially roll out next spring.  http://burpee.mobi/

Get Equipped

Got tools? Equipment manufacturers have been busy developing and sourcing great new greenhouse equipment to help with labor and energy efficiency. Here are a few.

S.B. Machinerie  Dan McMahon, who handles all of the hardgoods products sold through Ball Horticultural Company, took us “inside” the new SB16 Large Bale Breaker. The SB16 allows you to put a compressed peat bale—pallet and plastic covering and all—into the machine. While the side paddles and top spring coils hold the bale in place, you can remove the plastic and the pallet, keeping any excess peat inside the machine instead of on your floor. Dan explained that the SB16—which will be available for delivery starting in November—emits less dust, makes less of a mess and is ideal for any grower using 110- to 135-cu ft. bales. For the smaller growers, SB Machinerie is introducing the SB05, a manual flat and pot filler, and bale breaker. With this machine, you can use compressed bales or mix your own growing media and it’s inexpensive compared to other flat fillers because there’s no return system, said Dan.  www.ballhort.com/growers

TTA  Putting a new slant on plug grading, TTA’s new mobile blowout unit has an angled conveyor section, which allows for a smaller footprint. Plus, gravity helps the blown-out plugs land in the disposal bin rather than
in the plug tray. To make sure the cameras and computers survive moving through the greenhouse, the unit is built like a bank vault. www.tta.eu

**Cherry Creek** Booms are great at overhead watering. Now Cherry Creek can build you a boom that waters individual pots. Called "Step, Stop, Water," it's a system designed for their high-end booms that will stop the boom at individual rows of pots and water each pot through Loc-Line tubes. Great for large pots and combos. They say it's accurate to ¼ inch. www.cherrycreeksystems.com

**Private Gardens** We’ve all been waiting for wind and solar power to come to the common man … now it has arrived. Private Gardens has started a division called PG Green, partnering with several outside firms to bring alternative energy sources to greenhouses and garden centers. VQ Wind provides horizontal wind turbines; photovoltaic panels are from France's Richel; and biomass boilers come from Focus Energy. www.private-garden.com

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They do: A wedding at Short Course  While you were deciding between a long-term investment in boom irrigation or a new seeder, OFA staffer Jan Orick (left) made a really long-term commitment, tying the knot with Bill "Jake" Jaques in the display garden at the bottom of the escalators.

“I wanted to find somewhere to get married that was different and fun,” Jan said of her unusual wedding venue. “I had looked into some options … like the Columbus Zoo. We decided to just go downtown to the court house.” But coworkers suggested they get married at Short Course, and Jan and Jake decided to go for it.

The happy couple is pictured with Alicia Wells, also of the OFA staff, who got licensed specifically to perform the ceremony, which took place shortly after the show closed on Tuesday, July 13.

That's one hot pepper! We met Robin Waldrop of First Stage Greenhouse in rural Grovertown, Indiana, at OFA when he walked past us wearing a lime green t-shirt emblazoned with "Just Shut Up and Eat It" on the back, over a logo for "Cry Baby Peppers." We had to shoot a picture of the shirt. Turns out that's their own in-house brand, just launched in January. It includes about 30 different peppers, including the volcanic bhut jolokia pepper, ranked by Guinness as the hottest in the world (855,000 Scoville rating). First Stage sells to local independents in Indiana.
Testing the editors’ brain power  The chemical company BASF put four trade magazine editors on the hot seat during the OFA trade show to see how trivia-minded we are. Luckily, it was for a good cause, otherwise I’m not sure we would have submitted ourselves to the possible public embarrassment. BASF put up $500 each towards our favorite charities; we had the chance to win another $500 by successfully answering trivia questions such as “Love potion number _______” and “Which number on the telephone dial does not have any letters associated with it?” GPN’s Tim Hodson was the only one of us brilliant (or trivial) enough to go all the way, but Delilah Onofrey, Dave Kuack and myself (pictured with BASF’s Brian Lish) all did our charities proud. I was able to donate $850 to Double Harvest. Thanks, BASF!

—Chris Beytes