

GROWERTALKS

Features

8/25/2011

Inside July's Biggest Meeting

Ball Publishing Staff

Attendance figures at the annual OFA Short Course may not be quite where they were a few years ago, before the economy turned south (10,000-plus at its peak). The mood, however, was surprisingly NOT down. In fact, it was remarkably upbeat among the 9,000 attendees and exhibitors who spent July 9-13 at the Columbus Convention Center, especially considering the relatively dismal spring they had all just endured (6.5 out of 10 on *GrowerTalks'* Spring Rating Meter).

"Buoyant" was the term Graham Goodenough of Seederman Seeders used to describe attendees. "Upbeat," "positive" and "cautiously optimistic" were other terms we heard from exhibitors. Graham, who manufactures his Seederman needle and drum seeders in his Braceville, Illinois, factory, reported that this was easily his best Short Course ever, in customer interest, leads and outright sales.

It was surprising that the mood would be positive when spring was so negative in much of the country, including the Midwest where so many attendees hail from. But we dug into that and figured out one reason: Spring started strong but then turned cold and rainy in May. However, June was nice, customers came out and sales resumed, in some cases all the way to the Fourth of July and beyond. It's much easier to be in a good mood when the season finishes on a positive note. Few growers made serious profits, but those who were at the show say they managed to finish better than they might have or expected to, and that left them feeling pretty good.

Michael V. Geary, OFA's chief executive officer, agreed.

"In spite of the poor spring weather in numerous areas of the United States, the challenging economic conditions, and the event being organized during the week of a national holiday [OFA was about as close to the Fourth of July as it ever falls], participation held strong and was consistent with last year."

The Short Course featured 130 educational sessions, workshops, tours, learning labs, and numerous entertainment and social events for growers, garden center retailers, interior plantscapers, florists, and new professionals. An expanded focus this year was the Garden Center Live! area, which featured an interactive marketing lab, merchandising displays, and a merchandising contest.

Of course, we were there to seek out new products. Here are some highlights from the trade show floor.

Some of these are available on Ball Publishing videos featuring Bobbleheads Chris and Ellen, and we've given you easy links to see them. And be sure to mark your calendar for the 2012 Short Course, July 14-17 in Columbus, Ohio.

Pen & Petal's new product tour

One way to get around to numerous booths is with a PR firm such as Pen & Petal, who took us to visit five of their clients. It makes it easy to find new products we might otherwise miss. P&P's Joli Hohenstein (a former Ball Publishing editor, we might add, so we know she had a good upbringing) showed us some new ornamental grasses from Turkey that are available from McGregor; a new line of flowering grasses plus a line of Terra Nova-bred sedums from Emerald Coast Growers; Northwest Horticulture offered echinacea Piccolino and dwarf rudbeckia Little Goldstar; Svensson showed us a new light-diffusing shade curtain material called Harmony; and Danziger shared one of their newest series, O'Premiera otomeria (otomeria is a heat-loving annual in four colors). Check out the full tour on video at <http://tinyurl.com/penandpetal>.



“Plant It Friendly” with Ellepots and Schur pot bags

The Schur Star 1015C Bagging System from the Danish packaging company lets you drop Ellepots into plastic bags for retail sale. The line draws bags from a box (you can fit about a zillion bags in one box, saving shipping and storing compared to plastic pots) and then prints them with your desired info. Next, the bags are automatically opened so that employees can drop Ellepots into them. This process can even be automated. It's an interesting system for turning Ellepots into a viable retail product. <http://tinyurl.com/shortcourse1>

Fiber Grow Plantable Pots

What makes these coconut coir pots from Myers Industries different than others on the market? First, they're thin-walled pots, which means the roots easily go right through them (in fact, you can see daylight peeking through the pot walls). Also, they're completely plantable. And they have a USDA biobased certification. They're retailable, too; you can get shrink-wrap labeling on them, and they come in 11 pot sizes and three pack sizes. Finally, if you're skeptical that you can afford to retail a more-expensive biopot, Myers is offering a rebate that lets you buy up to 2,000 of their coir pots at the same price as plastic. They simply ask that you merchandise and sign the pots effectively at retail (they provide the signage), and price them 25 cents to 50 cents higher. <http://tinyurl.com/shortcourse1>

New transplant line from Visser

Dutch automation firm Visser always amazes us with their high-quality equipment. This year they showed a filling, transplanting and automatic cart-loading line. The US 60 pot filler is big! It's got a prefilling unit up top to help manage the media flow, an extra wide conveyor that handles any size tray, pot, basket, and plenty of height adjustment. Next in line is the new PC 21 transplanter, available with 8, 10 or 12 grippers, which can handle anything from a 512 plug to a 50 liner and can plant up to 10 plants per pot in a round or oval

configuration. It'll store up to 100 tray and pot configurations in its memory. Lastly, the Visser Econo Cart Loader (pictured) automatically pushes pots, flats or trays onto the shelves of your carts, handling up to 250 shelves per hour. The whole line is just \$180,000. <http://tinyurl.com/shortcourse2>

D.S. Cole's new Slimline 52

Doug Cole showed us his newest liner tray, the Slimline 52, which offers 52 rooted cuttings per strip, 312 per tray. They're grown spaced out, then packed at full density in shipping boxes at three times the density of a 102 tray, cutting your shipping costs by two-thirds. <http://tinyurl.com/shortcourse2>



Weird plant award

The weird plant award has to go to this bearded dianthus offered by Fleurizon.

Hanging basket carousel from AgriNomix

Designed from a homemade machine we saw at Metrolina years go, AgriNomix's Hanging Basket Carousel safely carries hanging baskets from ground level up to basket system level—

perfect for ECHOs or other moving basket systems. Workers manually load and unload the baskets, but the design lets them work quickly and flexibly. <http://tinyurl.com/agrinomix>

PlantPie

From grower Alan Van Wingerden of Orie Van Wingerden Greenhouses in Pompton Plains, New Jersey, the PlantPie is sort of a cross between a bedding plant flat and a bulb pan. It's designed for making easy-to-grow, easy-to-ship and easy-to-plant mixed containers. The idea comes from Alan's own greenhouse experiences, so you know it's been field tested. It's even patented. <http://tinyurl.com/plantpie>

Dramm's new PTO-powered fogger

Back when editor Chris Beytes had a greenhouse, he depended on a tractor-mounted PTO-powered sprayer for all his pest needs. It was a low-powered farm unit, which is why he admired this new one from Dramm. It's a PTO-powered fog unit called TracFOG that's capable of fogging a large area in a short time. Comes in two sizes, 100 liter and 400 liter. Check out Dramm's video of it here: <http://tinyurl.com/tracfog>

Fanciest meter we've ever seen

We all know pH and EC meters ... but how about the world's first nutrient meter for growers? From Irish company CleanGrow, a first-time exhibitor at OFA, CleanGrow's nutrient meter can measure calcium, chloride, potassium, sodium, ammonium and nitrates in your soil in real time, as often as you need. And they say it's so easy, even your parents can operate it! Now, it's not inexpensive: it's \$7,500 for the six-ion unit and

\$5,500 for a four-ion meter. But it's "well worth it" says CEO Ciaran Long if you're large enough to want to bring your media testing work in-house. <http://tinyurl.com/cleangrow>

Who won the flat screen?

Once again, Ball Publishing held a smartphone tag contest on the trade show floor—sort of a scavenger hunt, but instead of left-handed monkey wrenches, you looked for and snapped Microsoft Tags in select exhibitor booths. The winner of our grand prize—a 46-in. LCD television—was Tom and Donna McGuckin of Hilltop Nursery & Greenhouses, O'Fallon, Missouri. Congrats, McGuckins! Hope the endlessly looping Bobblehead Spring Trials videos didn't cause any permanent damage to the set.



On Monday evening at Short Course, we had the pleasure of presenting the Seventh Annual *GrowerTalks* Young Grower Award to Nancy Gambino, owner of Arte Verde Garden Center in Poplar Grove, Illinois. We made the presentation at OFA's "Unplugged" event. Special thanks to BASF for letting us crash the party they had sponsored.

Nancy (second from right) won by excelling in the tough assignment of writing an essay for *GrowerTalks* on the subject, "What are the biggest challenges facing growers today and how are you helping your business meet them." And she faced a barrage of questions in telephone interviews with our expert judges. This was Nancy's second time in the competition. Congratulations, Nancy. You've earned a cover story in the September issue of *GrowerTalks*.

Her fellow finalists—winners in their own rights—were Tara Tischauser (fourth in line) of Guthrie Greenhouses in Guthrie, Oklahoma, and Jeremy Webber (far right) of Sunny Border Nurseries, Kensington, Connecticut.

On the retail side, congratulations to *Green Profit's* Young Retailer Award winner Brian Goldbach (left) of Adams Nurseries in Lancaster, New York. Finalists were Jason VanderMay (second in line) and Jordan Graffin (third in line).



If only we could make money this easily all the time! That's probably what this motley group of magazine editors was thinking after raking in a combined \$3,300 for 30 minutes work in BASF's "Pile on the Cash" fundraiser trivia game. This was for a good cause—four good causes, actually (left to right): the American Red Cross (Dave Kuack), America In Bloom (Delilah Onofrey), the Jack Williams

Scholarship Fund (Tim Hodson) and Double Harvest (Chris Beytes).