

GROWERTALKS

Features

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A Really Big Show

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Close to 10,000 of our closest friends gathered for the big annual show in Columbus, Ohio. And big is the operative word this year. They added 30,000 sq. ft. of exhibit space to the hall and that equates to 155 extra exhibitors, for 698 total ... but no extra days to visit them! So me and my fellow editors felt even more frantic to get around the hall before closing time Tuesday.

With the new space came an all-new show layout. You didn't find a single company in their "usual" spot—everything's had been shuffled. As always, some folks were pleased (count Ball Publishing in that group; we have an end cap by the front doors) and some companies that used to be front-and-center now find themselves in a back corner. Hey, somebody has to occupy those spots. But that's the nature of the trade show business.

The show felt good, and certainly looked good, with plenty of creative booths. And how was the mood following the rollercoaster spring? Alas, I can't give you a good answer. Spring was ... well, schizophrenic might be one way to describe it. Great one minute, lousy the next. It left many of you dizzy with wondering what would come next. Some of you broke records; others of you are simply glad it's over and you came close to last year's numbers.

And there may be a new market that's represented at Cultivate—cannabis. More than a few companies were showing cannabis-related products and marketing (one video we saw showed cannabis plants rather than the typical petunias). And one fellow who sells computer controls said that 50% of the customers he spoke with on the opening day of the show were cannabis growers—not bedding plant growers getting into cannabis, but cannabis growers. That could be a growth area for show attendance.

Now, for a few highlights:

New space, new displays

- Extra space allowed AmericanHort to offer more "interactive" displays for trade show goers—which also helps some of the exhibitors promote their new genetics. The New Varieties area was much bigger and made it easy for people to browse without having to leave the exhibition hall.

- AmericanHort also moved some of their creative displays from the concourse to the hall. Attendees could walk through or have a seat in “gardens” that showed why plants are important, like for pollinator health (with an actual beehive full of honey bees) and how they improve local parks. #PlantsDoThat
- We ran into Metrolina's Abe VanWingerden and his observations of the show were that there were three main products that people were looking out for: machinery, software and rack systems. Which means “efficiency” and “labor savings” to us. And it certainly appeared that those booths with these products were hoppin’! Visser was conducting demonstrations of the new AutoStix URC sticking machine and it was hard to get around the crowd. We also saw a lot of people shopping for decorative pots and containers.

New products



• A Smaller Transplanter

While cutting sticking remains the Holy Grail, plug transplanters are still key for many growers. Dutch company TTA introduced the PackPlanter S, with S standing for small. Its conveyor belt is just 1,450 mm long (57 in.) instead of 2,230 mm long (88 in.) of their larger Pack Planter for a much smaller footprint. You can even fold the plug conveyor up and out of the way. Yet the grippers, transport mechanism and controls are all the same found in its big brother, with up to 16 mechanical or servo motor grippers available. Cost is 30% to 35% less, says Steve Biles.

But don't assume it's for the smaller grower; Steve says big growers like the compact size for use as a secondary machine. www.tta.eu

• Back in the Transplanter Business

Bouldin & Lawson, long known for soil handling, was heavily into transplanters back in the dawn of the technology, but they got out of them about 15 years ago. Now they're back, with two machines that combine everything they learned back then and all the developments that have come since. The PlugPlanter 24 and 24S (S for servo) are the result. Both feature simple operation and quick-change grippers. The S model offers push-button changeover from one plug tray and finished container to the next, while the manual model takes a bit more time to change. It's better for growers doing long runs of one size. Bob's Market in West Virginia has put the new machine through its development paces, so you know it's seen real-world action. Cost is about \$60,000 for the 24 and \$78,000 for the 24S. www.bouldinlawson.com

• McConkey's Century Basket

We admired the shape of McConkey's new Century hanging basket. We were told the idea came from a customer, who envisioned the twisted shape, which McConkey first created on their 3-D printer. Cadence Hendrickson is holding the prototype and the finished 12-in. pot, which features a heavy, rimless design. www.mcconkeyco.com

• Bots and Magnets

Those are what Rob Lando of AgriNomix is hot on these days. Rob showed us a cool idea for those who

can't find enough planting labor: the "Tracking Transplanterbot" or "Bot" for short. It's a simple two-gripper transplanter designed to be placed alongside a manual transplanting line. You set it up for simple, repetitive planting chores; for instance, several bots on one line can do mixed combos, with one planting spikes, another planting the fillers and a third planting the spillers. There's minimal automation on board, to keep cost below \$50,000 each. If you can't find workers to do your planting, maybe a squad of bots can do it for you, with no breaks or sick days.

As for magnets, Rob was almost giddy with how simple and versatile they are. Such as their new high-speed dibbler, with the dibbles held to the dibble plate with magnets. To set it up, you stick the dibbles in the pot where you'd like the holes, then run it through the dibbler unit. The plate comes down, the magnets stick the dibbles to the plate, and from that point on, every pot gets dibbled in the same spot. We asked Rob if he found any other ingenious uses for magnets and he pointed out all the clear plastic shields that are now held in place with them, making for quick and easy adjustments. www.agrinomix.com



- **Cherry Creek Systems' Tower Boom Universal Attachment**

A boom irrigator is like a smartphone: it can do a lot more than just what its name implies. That is, if you have a way to easily add attachments to your boom. Cherry Creek has made it easy to add attachments to their Tower Boom with their new Universal Attachment. It lets you attach trimmers or mowers (shown) for pinching or shearing crops; lights for night interruption lighting or UV disinfection; fans for temperature uniformity or hardening of plants; and even organic pest control using moving sticky traps.

Cherry Creek offers motorized or manual versions; the motorized unit features on-board power and quick disconnects. www.cherrycreeksystems.com

- **WaterPulse**

This maker of capillary mat-type irrigation systems gained fame when Walmart picked up their product to use in all their garden centers. Now they offer a hanging basket irrigation system that uses fixed emitters and a clever valve (the green thing in the picture) that opens when a basket is placed on it and closes when the basket is lifted off. Hopefully, customers (and employees) get where the baskets go. www.waterpulse.com

- **Bayer's Altus Insecticide**

Growers will get genuinely excited about this introduction: a new insecticide featuring an all-new active ingredient (AI) in a new IRAC subclass.

It's called Altus and you can use it as a spray or drench for sucking insects, especially aphids and whiteflies, with action also against scales, mealybugs and leafhoppers. It's got both translaminar (top to bottom of the leaf) and systemic action, depending upon which application technique you use.

The active ingredient is called Flupyradifurone, in the class Butenolide. Its IRAC subclass is 4D. Altus is labeled for greenhouse and nursery ornamentals, greenhouse vegetables and transplants, interiorscape and the landscape—lots of uses! Testing shows no signs of phytotoxicity, even on sensitive plants like gerbera

and New Guinea impatiens. EPA gives it reduced risk status; it's got a four-hour REI (12 hours in California).

The big news is that Altus is pollinator friendly. There have been more than 30 studies on bees, including feeding it to adults and larvae, with minimal impact. It's easy on beneficials, too, so good for IPM programs.

Best of all, it's on the market now, in time for poinsettia season.

• **Flow Vision**

The company that's helped dozens of businesses be more efficient has improved on their inventory software. Rio—which stands for Rack Item Optimizer—allows growers to track what should go on which rack, even down to which shelf the plants go on. Now Rio is cloud-based. Flow Vision's Steve Forkey said that more growers have been asking for more cloud-based software so that they can control their inventory from any device. "It increases efficiency in getting the trucks out," said Steve.

• **Svensson**

This family-owned textile company is mostly known for its shade curtains on the grower side. But this year at Cultivate, the company introduced new colorful curtains for garden centers. Basically, they printed Harmony screens with color, so the shade curtains are still flame retardant and will help retailers provide a pleasant shopping experience for customers. The product, called Deco Harmony, comes in four colors right now: Terracotta, Lavender, Yellow and Gray. They've installed them in two garden centers so far.

• **Still Water Designs Inc.**

Reducing physical labor in the greenhouse isn't always possible, but in the CropKing booth we found a product that can help some growers. The Summit Trellis System from Still Water Designs Inc. was created for greenhouse tomatoes to alleviate some of those aches and pains, as well as speed up the process, by automatically lowering a row of tomato plants down to be picked or scouted with one touch of a button. Each plant gets a hook at the top on an evenly spaced system.

"Some systems don't do it uniformly," says Ben Netz, owner of Still Water Designs. The product has been in development for two years and could have multiple applications, including hops and strawberries.

• **EZPond**

EZPond from the Netherland Bulb Co. dispels the mystery behind pond plants and aquatic gardens with their eye-catching and informative POP. Color-coded plant tags, simple sizing charts and easy depth guides inform and educate consumers on how to create a plant-filled pond. Tags denote "waterlilies," "marginals," "oxygenators" and "floaters." In addition, EZPond offers a broad spectrum of water plants, hardy and tropical, through their network of garden centers. Find out more at www.netherlandbulb.com.

• **Terra Nova**

One plant that didn't get highlighted during California Spring Trials is Begonia Holiday Jolly Holly. Part of the Holiday series of begonia, Jolly Holly features spiky, holly-like foliage and even has small red flowers that form in clusters. It's also tolerant of indoor home conditions, which would make it a great winter holiday plant, says Chuck Pavlich, director of new product development at Terra Nova.

“The lower light conditions will make it more silvery,” he adds. It has a short production time and is available now through tissue culture. The Holiday series also includes Spirit, Snowflake and New Year’s Eve.



• **Frida Kahlo Rose**

Weeks Roses named their newest variety after Mexican painter Frida Kahlo. The flowers of this rose are scarlet red and gold striped that intensifies with age, adding a red blush as the final touch. The flowers are set in small clusters on a compact, upright plant. It has a mildly fruity fragrance and is a disease-resistant plant with glossy green foliage. The POP features an image of Kahlo with her quote, “I paint flowers so they will not die.”

• **The Stack Trellis**

The Stack Trellis from Larry and Diane at Scroll Trellis is a four-pronged plastic trellising system for barrels, hanging baskets and anywhere else you’d like to give support for climbing or vertical plants. It’s improved over the previous design by being injection molded, having attachment sites along the trellis for both plant vines

and twine, and having the ability to stack kits one on top of another for taller plants. It’s definitely a problem solver for consumers.

• **Shipping Foliage Made Easier**

There are issues that you, the garden retailer, know about that us trade editor types don’t really know about. One of those topics is how difficult it is to ship foliage out of Florida. From what we understand, if you don’t require enough volume to fill a truck, you have to arrange your own shipping, whose cost is essentially unknown until the weight, sleeving and packing options are finalized. It’s enough of a headache for garden centers north of Florida to not want to order foliage. That’s not really an option now, is it?

Heart of Florida Greenhouses in Zolfo Springs, Florida, has a mind to change that. They’re shipping their full assortment via FedEx Priority. The boxes are max 40-in. tall (so no plant material over that height), 40-in. wide and 48-in. deep. Salesman Austin Bryant told us they never, ever ship over a weekend, either, meaning less waste coming your way. It’s a great way for smaller IGCs and florists to better manage their inventory, allowing them to place smaller orders more often and adjust the assortment considering demand while keeping shipping costs low.

• **Christmas in July**

Another shipping news item—M&M Wintergreens debuted their Shop & Ship Collection at Cultivate. The Cleveland-based wholesale Christmas and winter greens business will now be offering an e-commerce-ready solution to garden centers for the coming season.

What they have are three new products: a wreath and two versions of a porch pot. What M&M has done is create the designs, products and packages for retailers to purchase. The retailer then ships them to the consumer. Rather than have your customers’ dollars heading Amazon’s way, they can still purchase a beautiful wreath or porch pot from your own e-commerce site.

Labor: Where Are We Going & Where Will We Find it?

All of the sessions that focused on labor and hiring were standing-room only—many you couldn't even get in the door!—so you know it's weighing heavily on the minds of growers and retailers. AmericanHort's Craig Regelbrugge held what's been an annual session on labor at Cultivate. This year, he said his goal was to provide "context for the current and worsening labor situation in horticulture."

Many of the points he touched on we discussed in the July cover story of GrowerTalks (which turned out to be somewhat fortuitous), like how the current workforce is changing and that Mexican immigration peaked 10 years ago and is declining. He admitted that he anticipates significant difficulty with trying to get a decent guest worker program with the current administration, especially with some of the populist thinking inside the White House. However, the new Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue has a history of being an advocate for farmers and growers and that gives Craig some hope.

Another hurdle is that many of the cabinet positions have yet to be filled, which makes it extremely difficult to try and push your agenda through when you have no one to talk to, said Craig. And we're "fighting the battle on many fronts," he said—policy, regulatory and legislative—especially when many in Congress have "hardened positions" on immigration. The Congressional calendar is getting more crowded, but Craig sees the possibility for something to happen in the next few months. "Enforcement will be the driver" in any legislation that is drafted by this Congress and Craig warned that any bill will "probably be conservative and not an adequate solution."

The main theme of his talk was uncertainty. And because there are so many things that are out of our control, he offered some solutions to help deal with labor shortages, like offering full-time "certifications"—especially for landscapers that can have their staff plant in the spring and summer and remove snow in the winter. Craig ended with a few other bits of advice.

"You have to prove to policy makers that it's not 'cheap labor.' A lot of costs are involved with getting foreign-born workers. And document everything you've ever done and tried."

Women in Hort

With more discussions about income inequality and women's roles in businesses around the country, it's not surprising that this topic has touched our industry as well. A couple of years ago, Dümmer Orange's Rebecca Lusk and Kate Santos created Luxflora, a non-profit, women-led industry organization that allows women in our industry to come together to discuss trends and ideas to promote plants and flowers. Their mission is to help move horticulture forward with a "visionary, influential floriculture network" of women leaders.

The session was a panel discussion with 13 women that represent different roles and organizations within the industry—from academic to business owners to breeding companies.

As the panelists introduced themselves, it was interesting to hear their backgrounds and how many of them didn't start out their careers in horticulture. Many of them "fell" into the industry and in turn fell in love with the product.

The moderators posed a few questions for the panel, such as "What do women provide to the industry that makes it better?" Suzy McCoy, Garden Media Group, said women know the needs of our core customer

better. Barbara Jeffery-Gibson (Jeffery's Greenhouse, St. Catharines, Ontario) said women can handle the stress and adapt to change quickly. Kristine Lonergan, TVI Imports, said women are more open-minded to ideas and concepts. Bridget Behe, Michigan State University, said women can think with both sides of their brain at the same time. But Costa's Marta Maria Garcia was quick to point out that, yes—most of our consumers are women—but we mustn't forget that most greenhouse growers are men. We have to remember to market to them, too.

It was an interesting discussion and an hour certainly wasn't enough time to tackle all of the issues women in our industry face. Perhaps there will be more sessions geared toward industry women at future Cultivate shows.

For more information or to join the organization, visit luxflora.org.

The Economy:

"Put the Pedal to the Metal" According to Texas A&M Ag Economist Charlie Hall, we've been out of the economic downturn for a little while now, and while things aren't perfect with the economy, we're seeing growth above where we were in 2007. So why is our industry still below where we were before the economy? "The bottom line is people have shifted away expenditures from what we're offering," he says. "The hard question we have to ask is why?"

He routinely looks at several indexes to get a clear picture of economic conditions, and we won't get into all the specifics because he detailed them pretty extensively, but we will share his final thoughts: "Between now and next year, put the pedal to the metal." That means, make those investments you need to remain relevant. He also asked, "What's your contingency?" Do you have a plan firmly fixed in your mind for the upcoming years? And finally, he said to not let the media shape your strategic opinion (oh, the irony in reading this magazine, right?). We took that to mean look at your own data and make your decisions based on that, not on what you think will happen based on media reports. But you decide for yourself. **GT**