GROWERTALKS

GT in Brief

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Commercial Greenhouses: A History

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At the Westlands Museum in Honselersdijk, in the heart of the Dutch greenhouse industry, you can walk up and touch the history of the modern commercial greenhouse. For instance, here (from left to right) is a dubbele bak (double bin) cold frame, a wooden A-kas (A -shaped greenhouse) and an iron druivenserre (a glasshouse designed specifically for cultivating grapes). These fascinating structures and others maintained by the museum demonstrate Dutch greenhouse technology in the 19th century—the forefathers of the modern glass greenhouses you see in the background.

The Westland is a 35-square-mile region of the Netherlands located southwest of Amsterdam, between Rotterdam and Den Haag, that's home to an estimated 5,000 acres of greenhouses. Key towns include Naaldwijk,'s-Gravenzande, Monster, Poeldijk, De Lier and Honselersdijk, where we found the museum.

For centuries, glass has been used to protect plants, first by leaning it against the brick or stone walls ("fruit walls") used by many estate gardeners. This evolved into lean-to structures called "muur kas" ("wall greenhouse") and also freestanding cold frames, both of which allowed growers to start crops earlier and protect from bad weather.

As glass panes became larger and cheaper, innovative growers expanded their wall greenhouses and cold frames into freestanding A-frame structures that allowed them easier access to their crops while offering fresh fruits and vegetables when others couldn't, opening up markets abroad, especially England, which loved the Dutch tomatoes and grapes.

Similar growing-under-glass developments were taking place elsewhere, including America, where Frederick Lord and William Burnham were specializing in grand conservatories. But it was the Dutch in the 1920s who combined numerous freestanding greenhouses together to create the first gutter-connected greenhouse (inset), which they called a "warenhuis" (warehouse)—a house full of wares for sale. It was more energy- and labor-efficient, required less materials to construct and, thanks to its glass sidewalls, maximized light—the ancestor of every commercial

gutter-connected greenhouse in use today. **GT**