

## Acres Online - Live from Africa



# *GrowerTalks'* Acres Online

News and commentary from *GrowerTalks* magazine

Friday, September 11, 2009

This time:

### Fourteen impressions of South Africa's industry

Where do you begin when writing about South Africa, a country that few people know anything about? Other than apartheid and Nelson Mandela (and maybe Gary Player and Nick Price, if you're a golfer), there's little about this southernmost African nation that has put it top-of-mind for most folks. Which is why I'm giving you, over the next couple of *Acres Onlines*, a brief taste of the floriculture industry here.

But why am I in South Africa in the first place? Because they invited me, that's why. A couple of years ago, a few brave leaders of SANA, the South African Nursery Association, in an effort to help expand the minds of their membership, said to themselves, "We should get this witty and well-traveled chap Chris Beytes from *GrowerTalks* down here to tell us what's going on in the rest of the world."

Well, naturally, the rest of the organization replied, "Why him?" (or perhaps, "Who?"). But eventually the deal was struck, and I was invited by SANA and Ball Straathof to come to SA to speak to the country's growers. In fact, they've made the most of my presence and have set up three half-day seminars, in Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban—making this a 12-day trip covering the bulk of the country ... which, by the way, is about as big as California, Nevada, Arizona and New Mexico combined.

### Fourteen impressions of SA

I got in Saturday night after an 18-hour plane ride, and have been visiting growers and retailers ever since; and the first question everyone asks is, "What do you think so far?" So in this email I'll answer that question. Next time, I'll profile some of the businesses and people I've met.

1. South Africa looks like California, with some Florida thrown in. Forget mud huts,

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jungles or deserts. What I've seen so far looks just like my two favorite states. September is the beginning of spring, and the climate has been perfect—just like California Pack Trials in April or Florida in February. The common landscape plants are a combination of Mediterranean and tropical—visiting a garden center here is identical to visiting one in either of those states. Even the architecture is the same, with terracotta tile roofs and stucco walls everywhere. If you want the “real” Africa, you have to travel north.

**2. Facilities also mimic those of the southern or western US.** Structures are pole shadehouses and single-layer poly or fiberglass-glazed greenhouses which, whether free-standing or gutter-connected, are called “tunnels.”



**3. Labor is abundant and relatively cheap (about \$1 an hour),** which means mechanization is minimal. However, growers are starting to consider some basic labor-savings. I've seen one flat filler, and a few shipping carts. But with employees who use their heads like this lady, who needs automation?



**4. The bedding plant market is vigorous, and is dominated by typical crops:** petunias, marigolds, begonias. Cool-season favorites include alyssum, pansy and primula. However, what they call “perennials” are some of our newer annuals that happen to be natives here, such as diascia, osteospermum and nemesia. Calibrachoa is growing in interest.

**5. Over the past two seasons, impatiens were wiped out by downy mildew.** They were the nation's No. 1 annual; now everyone is afraid to grow them. Nobody knows how or why the disease struck. It's been tough on grower—for one I met, impatiens were 30% of their total annual business! Fibrous begonias are the best replacement so far. Growers are putting a lot of hope in PanAmerican Seed's new Divine series of seed New Guineas, which has just been introduced here.

**6. In the Gauteng area (the province Johannesburg is in), almost all bedding is sold to independent retailers on consignment!** It's not quite pay-by-scan—retailers sign a contract

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to take responsibility for caring for the plants—but it goes into the stores with no guarantee of payment. Because of this, each bedding grower uses a unique color of pack so they know whose has sold. Delivery drivers provide some degree of merchandising once or twice a week.

**7. Packs are the most popular bedding container—**

I've seen six-packs and nine-packs most often. In Jo'burg, some retailers sell plug-sized plants to end consumers for their landscapes, in 128 and even 200-count trays.

"Instant color" would be a tray of 24 plants of roughly 3-in. size. Interestingly, I suppose because of the abundant labor, they don't use shuttle trays here—all the six-packs are loose and handled one at a time! Workers will use large trays to move them, but they go out loose on the ground or bench, both in the nursery and at retail. On the right is Daniel Kilchenmann, GM of San Michell Nursery near Cape Town, showing off his six-pack begonias.



**8. In Cape Town, pack color doesn't indicate the grower, it indicates the price points that retailers have established.**

All growers follow the same pack color rules for low, medium and high price points—for instance, at one garden center, blue packs of premium annuals are 17.95 rand (\$2.39), brown packs of premium perennials are 26.95 rand (\$3.59) and black packs of basic annual are 14.95 rand (\$2).

**9. Plastic bags are a common container for landscape color, shrubs and trees.** Some growers even print their brand on them. They're cheap and easy for consumers; however, some growers are trying to move their larger color into pots. In Cape Town, you see more gallon-sized pots and fewer bags. The yellow bee logo bags are from Peeble's Plants near Johannesburg.



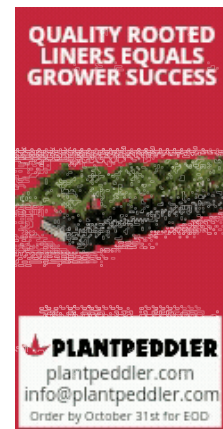
**10. Veggies and herbs have been booming the last couple years.**

Some growers reports sales increases of 300%. There are several herb specialists and herb brands, such as Healthy Living Herbs by Doonholm Nursery. And while I've met no certified organic growers, I've met at least one that uses organic growing practices.

**11. They do have chains that sell bedding, but they don't dominate the marketplace (yet).**

Mica and Builder's Warehouse are the two DIY chains; Mica is said to be struggling, while Builder's Warehouse (22 locations) and its smaller Builder's Express stores (21 locations) are expanding. Their buyer, Heyns Botha, was at my Cape Town talk on Thursday—he's a nice fellow with an independent garden center background who seems to have done a good job balancing chain volume and IGC variety and quality. They do NOT sell bedding on consignment, although Heyns tells me they're trialing it with one vendor in Johannesburg.

**12. Contrary to what you may have heard, it's safe here.**





Chicago is safe, meaning if you go to the wrong place at the wrong time, you can get yourself mugged or shot. Jo'burg has plenty of crime. There's a sort of war going on between the outlaw taxicab drivers and the new bus service. But it's isolated to certain areas, and you should no more be leery of South Africa than you would worry about visiting Hollywood because east Los Angeles has gangs.

**13. World Cup fever is about to hit.** South Africa is host to the 2010 World Cup soccer tournament, and millions are being spent on stadiums and infrastructure. Ball Straathof is working to help the industry find ways to capitalize on the beautification of the country, and growers hope there'll be a boom in landscaping and a need for plenty of bedding plant color.

**14. I can't stop with 13, because that might be unlucky.** So for No. 14 I'll mention that, thus far, I've eaten warthog, eland, kudu and crocodile, and I've learned that a backyard cookout is called a "braaivleis," or "braai" for short. In Afrikaans, the local language, braaivleis means "roasted meat."

That sounds good in any language!

As always, if you have a comment, question, gripe or compliment (or recipes for warthog), share it [HERE](#)! And click [HERE](#) to hook up to me on Twitter for truly instant news.

See you next time, with more from South Africa,

Chi

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