



Tim Hodson, Editorial Director
(847) 391-1019 • thodson@sgcmail.com

Spring Recap: Offbeat but Upbeat

I know spring is always a crazy time for you in the greenhouse. It also is a busy travel time for me as I hit the road to see what is going on in the industry. In the past couple of months, I have spent a lot of time in airports, rental cars and hotel rooms during my visits to growers, garden centers, university trials and trade shows.

It did not matter where I was — the three constant topics of discussion were the weather, the economy and sustainability.

A Field Day in Florida

The weather was a hot topic (no pun intended) during my visit to the University of Florida's 2008 Floriculture Field Days, produced in conjunction with the Florida Nursery, Greenhouse & Landscape Association (FNGLA). The growers in that region are still talking about last year's drought — and some are still feeling the economic effects — but they were all incredibly upbeat about 2008.

According to GPN's Consulting Editor Dr. Jim Barrett, this year's field trials drew record numbers. Because of the 2007 drought, many of the attendees were looking for sustainable varieties as well as sustainable production techniques they could incorporate into their businesses. Low-water-consumption plants topped many of their lists.

The University of Florida's trials coordinator, Jennifer Boldt, and her team of students and faculty members did an amazing job on this year's trials. The gardens look great and were planted with sustainable practices in mind, including the use of Ellepots, extremely limited use of pesticides and flowerbed irrigation using effluent water from the university water treatment plant.

To learn more about the trial gardens, visit trialgarden.ifas.ufl.edu. And keep an eye out for the

July issue of GPN, which will feature an article on the university's spring trial results.

Crazy Midwest Weather

While visiting growers and garden centers in Michigan and Illinois in April and May, the unpredictable weather was on everyone's minds. Ask any grower in the Midwest whether they thought the weatherman was wacko this spring, and I'm sure the answer would be a resounding "Yes!" The weather was different every single day, which made it tough for growers to plan properly.

When I was visiting one Michigan grower in early May, the temperature was in the low 40s. He had a greenhouse overloaded with product that was waiting to be shipped. He said his retail customers just did not have room for the product yet because the cool temperatures were keeping consumers away. I called him the following week, when the temperature hit the 60s, and he said product was thankfully moving at a much more rapid pace.

Mother's Day weekend was a bust weather-wise for many Midwestern growers and retailers, but the weather did rebound nicely on Memorial Day weekend. Hopefully, that will extend into this month and beyond.

Going Green in Vegas

I also attended Lawn & Garden World at May's 2008 National Hardware Show in Las Vegas, where the biggest concern for attendees and exhibitors alike was the economy. The housing slump has really put the screws to many different types of retailers, especially the home improvement stores.

Much to my surprise, show organizers said there actually was a 14 percent increase in attendance this year. Lawn & Garden World visitors had the opportunity to see many of the latest eco-friendly products that are making their way to retailers' shelves.

GPN and *Lawn & Garden Retailer* regular contributor Stan Pohmer of Pohmer Consulting Group gave a special presentation on "The New and Changing World of Sustainability" that sparked some lively discussions among attendees and exhibitors.

So you tell me: How was your spring? Drop me a line at thodson@sgcmail.com. **GPN**

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Top: GPN's Consulting Editor Jim Barrett and Tim Hodson discuss the different varieties on display in the University of Florida's trial gardens. **Bottom:** University of Florida's trial gardens coordinator Jennifer Boldt directs attendees through various flowerbeds at the 2008 Floriculture Field Days in Gainesville.