Dear Diary

The ins and outs of seven days on the road touring stock production in Central America

By Bridget White

I don't know how it happened that a cold January evening in Germany found us planning a trip to Central America, but there we were, Joe Fox from MasterTag, Jim Snyder from Superfresh Marketing, Jim Barrett from the University of Florida and me sitting around a table justifying a mid-winter trip to the tropics. Actually, Fox and Snyder made it as far as Mexico by that summer; Barrett and I couldn't head south for over a full year, until February 2004. And when news of a second Ralstonia outbreak came early this year, we were glad that we had planned a trip to Guatemala and Costa Rica to check out cutting production.

The following is a quick taste of our trip; look for additional articles in *GPN* over the coming months.

Clockwise from top left: Ecke's Guatemala facility literally sits in the shadow of an active volcano. That "cloud" you see over the volcano is actually smoke that has just erupted; Stock production of the widely popular 'Prestige' with an inset showing the in-ground production beds; one of the nation's leading poinsettia experts, Jim Barrett was able to give a mini consultation on some of the problems U.S. poinsettia growers are currently facing; No, this is not a swimming pool...it's Ecke's irrigation holding pond. Water is chlorinated before being UV treated and piped to the greenhouses. All this caution is necessary because of the in-ground production.

FEBRUARY 7

Wanting to arrive in Guatemala early enough to take a tour of the airport, I got booked on a 6:30 a.m. flight (that's the last time I'll let Jim make my travel arrangements) to Guatemala City. 2:30 p.m. found both of us through customs and with our host for the day, Byron Calderon from Ecke Guatemala, who arranged a behind-the-scenes tour of the cargo shipping facility at the Guatemala City airport.

Unfortunately, we were not allowed to bring our cameras into the secured area of the airport, but we were allowed full access to all areas, including standing 25 feet from a plane being loaded for shipment to the United States. On hand that day were boxes of The Flower Fields material from Ecke, caladium bulbs from Oro Farms and cut flowers from multiple suppliers.

As the airport is a critical link in the freshness chain, I'll wait until next month's article to go into detail.

FEBRUARY 8

We devoted Sunday to touring the Ecke facilities. The main farm, a 25-acre facility, houses all poinsettia stock production for the company, with the 22-acre farm two dedicated to Flower Fields material. At peak, the farms can produce approximately 1.5 million poinsettia cuttings and 3.5-4 million Flower Fields cuttings.

Both poinsettia stock and vegetative annual stock are grown, believe it or not, in the ground, and Jim and I agreed this is the cleanest in-ground production we have ever seen. The soil is a sandy volcanic ash and allows for essentially hydroponic production. According to production manager Andor Gerendas, Ecke has been growing in the ground for seven years and has it almost down to a science. The soil is treated with methyl bromide before each planting, and they are overly cautious with irrigation water, treating with both chlorine and UV, to make sure no bacteria gets into the soil.

This is the hub of the poinsettia world, and everything from decorative wrought iron ➧

poinsettias on the gate to poinsettias painted on trash cans proved it. Despite the large area, Ecke Guatemala retains the small-company feel everyone loves about the Ranch, and you can see influences of Paul Jr. everywhere.

FEBRUARY 9

The bulk of our second day in Guatemala was designated to seed production. Although this was primarily a vegetative-focused trip, we wanted to pick up at least one seed location, and the Goldsmith folks were nice enough to show us both of their local seed production facilities.

Started in 1966, the largest farm, Jardines Mil Flores, encompasses approximately 38 acres of production and was the first U.S. breeder location in the country. Lower protocol vegetative crops, seed geraniums, gazanias, zinnias, snapdragons and several other crops are produced at this location. The other seed farm, Las Vertientes, is almost 2,000 feet higher in elevation and perfect for cold-loving crops such as viola, pansies and impatiens. Annual seed production from the two farms is approximately 1-2 tons and peaks in February and June/July. At this time, all seed is sent to Gilroy for distribution and seed treatments, but Jardines Mil Flores is currently preparing to direct ship non-treated orders.

Clockwise from top left: Zinnia production at Goldsmith Seed's Jardines Mil Flores location. Pictured is pollen harvest from one of the Swizzle zinnia parents; Danzinger New Guinea impatiens at Oro Farms. Note the workers in Tyvek suits in the background. This is a standard sanitation practice at Oro for all greenhouses; Acid injection at Oro Farms. I don't know if I have ever seen this many acid injectors in one place and certainly didn't expect to see it in Guatemala; pansy seed for shipment to Goldsmith Seeds' Gilroy facility. Goldsmith ships 1-2

If you've never seen seed production, it's pretty surprising what hybrids can be produced from radically different parent lines. A 4-inch-tall, small-flowered, male-parent zinnia can be crossed with a 3-foot-tall, female-parent zinnia with no petals to produce a perfectly sized bedding plant with large flowers. And we were told that for zinnias 15 rows of male parents are needed to fertilize four rows of females (save the jokes about men working harder; I've already had to listen to them).

By the time we finished with both Goldsmith seed facilities and a long lunch (the Guatemalan idea of a light lunch is a *small* steak to go with your beans, rice and steamed vegetables), we were running late for our last stop of the day, Oro Farms.

Located less than 20 minutes from Goldsmith's Las Vertientes facility, Oro Farms is building a state-of-the-art facility that was still under construction when we visited, with four new houses in production for this spring and three times as many scheduled for completion before spring 2005.

In total, Oro has 17 acres of production throughout Guatemala at different locations, most of which is contracted from other companies. The goal of the new construction is to have more control over quality and sanitation. These ➧

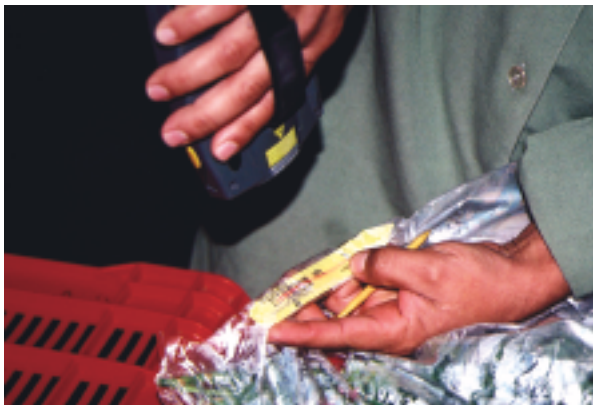
issues are especially important for a company such as Oro that produces cuttings for many other companies such as Suntory, S&G Flowers, Danzinger and Bodger Botanicals, all with different lines and different specs.

FEBRUARY 10

I have to admit that I had looked forward to this day since we made plans to visit Guatemala, as this was going to be my introduction to vegetative geranium production, including a visit to the controversial Goldsmith geranium farm.

The morning started with the kind of drive I had been expecting for three days — one that took us over a mountain range, down a dirt road and through tiny villages. It was truly beautiful, and the best part was it was all work because when we stopped we were at Ball FloraPlant's geranium farm, Finca Floricultura. Reportedly one of the highest sanitation geranium production facilities around, our visit was fairly rare, and the photos we were allowed to take even more so.

Ball truly does have an impressive facility with concrete floors, raised benches and row after row of beautiful plants. Built at the base of a volcano, this 25-acre facility has the perfect climate for geranium production: high light, dry



Clockwise from top left: A view down one of the main roads at Ball's Finca Floricultura Guatemalan geranium facility. Notice the new construction, part of which will become a retention pond for filtering irrigation water before release; The bags Ball uses for containers are fairly typical in Central America. There are holes in the sides and bottom for drainage, and the strands of wire the bags are sitting on keep leachate from re-entering bags; Small-sized volcanic rock that is used as media throughout Central America; Ball uses barcodes and RFID to track cuttings from the greenhouse to the customer.

Top: Geranium production at Goldsmith's Esquejes geranium facility. Since the facility was on hold at the time of our visit, plants contained almost three times the normal amount of cuttings; Jim Barrett (far right) with Goldsmith's geranium management team, including general manager Braulio Aguilar (second from right).

air and cool nights. As a result, the majority of space is dedicated to geranium production, though there are limited numbers of seed crops such as marigolds and gazanias produced here.

The production aspect of vegetative geraniums is not all that interesting, except for sanitation, which will be covered in more detail next month, so at Ball, shipping really stands out. Orders are cut, tracked and shipped with barcodes and RFID. It's a pretty sophisticated system that ensures the right product goes into each box.

After Ball, we were dropped at Goldsmith's geranium facility, Esquejes, which is just on the ➧

Growing More Than Plants

Goldsmith's on-site daycare

Let's face it; when most of us think of third world countries, we think of dirty cities, extremely low wages and sweat shops. Ravaged by war the past few decades, I expected the Central American countries we visited to reinforce these stereotypes. They didn't. We were greeted by good roads, mostly clean water and basically American-style working conditions.

Now I didn't look at the textile mills or food processing plants, but the 10 farms we visited looked like great places to work, and all indicated that they had fairly low turnover and no trouble filling vacant spots. Partly, this is because of a guaranteed wage of $7-10 per day plus incentives but mostly because of benefits that would make many American workers jealous.

By the end of our week-long trip, I had seen evidence of almost every kind of benefit imaginable: on-site medical and dental care by doctors, nurses and dentists; on-site day care for children and schooling for adults; subsidized busing; incentive programs for attendance, high productivity and quality that include money, vouchers for household goods and a job guarantee for the next peak season; and even a personal trainer for the company's soccer and basketball teams. And in most cases, these costly extras are completely voluntary.

other side of town, a beautiful facility that makes a definite impression on taking sanitation and quality seriously. (For those of you who read my March 2004 editor's report, I'm not about to start preaching again, so don't worry.)

Given that the property was on hold by the USDA when we visited, I was surprised to see a full staff of 250 employees moving from house to house, working on the plants. Goldsmith Guatemala general manager Braulio Aguilar informed us that they were doing maintenance on the plants and taking cuttings for callusing in case the property was released from hold; at the end of our visit, word came that the recertification would last through the season.

Clockwise from top left: Dummen's Pelarica geranium facility from a neighboring hilltop. As photos were not allowed in their greenhouses, we do not have actual operations photos; Innova Plant's botanic garden; To supply all three PW partners with cuttings, Innova Plant must harvest 80 million cuttings per year. In case they're too small to count, there are 23 workers in this quarter of the greenhouse; Innova Plant's Thomas Schuster is explaining to me the tracking system they have for tracing each cutting back to the worker that harvested it.

As of now, the future of this 35-acre facility remains uncertain; but when we were there, it was full of geranium stock plants for 2004 and held the nucleus group for 2005. Additionally, facility management was working on a new tracking system that, while details were not given, would attempt to track cuttings back to the bench where they were taken.

FEBRUARY 11

Timing and the airlines conspired against us so that travel filled this day. A 1½-hour flight from Guatemala to Costa Rica and a 2-hour drive to the Orosi Valley where Dummen's Pelarica is located left us just enough time to enjoy a glass of wine (or two) with Dutch production manager Ronald Geverinck and his family before heading to the hotel for the night.

FEBRUARY 12

Pelarica is located in a picturesque valley that borders a rainforest and whose hillsides are covered with coffee plants, the fruit of which we were told is headed to Starbucks. Despite its exotic local, this was a fairly typical European facility with imported greenhouses, on-site residences, recirculated rainwater for irrigation and a Dutch grower.

Opened in 1993 with 2½ acres of production, Pelarica has expanded twice and now supports 22 acres of production and 90 people year round, 250 at peak. This location produces all Dummen New Guineas, as well as part of the geraniums,

begonias and poinsettias headed to the United States and Europe

Ronald talked extensively about the challenges of producing in a humid environment and about the seemingly bright future for Dummen USA as several of their poinsettia and geranium lines are finally starting to gain acceptance by U.S. growers.

A three-hour walk around the facility showed us all three crops before heading off to an afternoon of play.

FEBRUARY 13

Our last day was spent touring the two production facilities that supply the three Proven Winners partners. Innova Plant, approximately 1½ hours from the Costa Rican capital of San Juan, was opened in 1995 and is owned by Kientzler. Eighty million vegetative annual cuttings are produced at this location annually, with approximately 80 percent shipped to the United States.

The second facility, Ticoplant, opened a few years ago with 4 acres of production as a back up for the main location. Ticoplant is jointly owned by all three PW partners and Kientzler and is mainly responsible for New Guinea production, though there is some spill over of other crops during busy times.

Both impressive facilities, Innova Plant has an on-site tissue culture and testing lab and a soon-to-be-opened botanic garden. Both sites have already switched to FedEx pick up, which makes importation into the United States quicker and easier, as boxes are already with the final carrier and do not have to make that switch upon entering the United States.

The situation at both PW locations is very different from almost any other stock production facility. Since Innova and Tico only have four customers, they can customize the type of cutting taken for each of them. In fact, they have a spec book on hand that shows the ideal cutting for Pleasant View as opposed to EuroAmerican or Kientzler. And while this makes for a little more education with cutting crews, it also ensures customer satisfaction.

FEBRUARY 14

Jim and I both caught flights back to the states on Valentine's Day, and by the time I saw the skyline of Chicago around 6 p.m., I felt like I had been on the road for weeks. It was a long trip, but one of the best I've ever taken. If you ever get the chance to head down to Central America, take it. The food is great, the people are friendly, the country is beautiful and our industry is doing some amazing things down there. GPN

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Editor's Note: Look for more articles about my travels to Central America in upcoming issues of GPN, *including an article in the May issue about sanitation and quality control.*

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