

Nuffield Horticultural Tour: Ghent, Belgium 24-27 September 2007

Day 1

Arboretum Kalmthout

The first plantings of this arboretum were made some 150 years ago. It is now renowned for its Hammamelis and holds an annual festival “to celebrate these extraordinary winter bloomers”! The Virginia Creeper looked splendid having climbed very high on both a tall oak and a tall pine. The hydrangeas and herbaceous plantings were coming to their end in this relaxed garden setting, which has some interesting trees. RHS members had free entrance!

De Ceuster Mesthoffer (DCM)

We were made very welcome by the enthusiastic Marketing Director, Frans Pauwels, who showed us round the state of the art organic fertilizer plant. Organic ingredients such as hoof and horn, blood and bone and soya enter the factory and from then on it is all self contained. The mixes are computer controlled so that many varied products can be achieved in various pack sizes including small attractively printed boxes for specific crops. These we saw later on sale at a garden centre. Their production seemed to be backed by scientific research and their sales seemed to justify numerous different mixes for different crops. Their production secret appeared to be their method of compression of the mix and the subsequent pelleting. Two men who operated this line can mix and bag 7 tons per hour. The second line produced mini pellets. They are achieving sales in several countries and this privately owned company appeared to be prospering with plans for expansion. Other companies in the group are involved organic ingredients, animal feeds and even human health products. They are also involved in soil fumigation and inoculation with stress on the importance of micro biological life of the soil, a subject for further research.

Day 2

University of Ghent Botanic Gardens

We were greeted by the enthusiastic and humorous Director, Prof Dr P Goetghebeur, with the news, unknown to most, that plant classification had changed and that there were now not only Monocotyledons and Dicotyledons but also Basal Angiosperms. The Botanic Garden was started in Napoleonic times but moved to its present site some 100 years ago. Fifteen thousand species are grown, the unpromising outside area giving way to 23 glasshouses filled with very healthy and interesting plants.

Marc Bertier, Azalea Grower at LoChristi

50 million azaleas are grown annually in Europe but we learnt that over half of these were grown in this area of Belgium. Marc Bertier grows one million green plants, which are sold to others for flowering. The very compact plants are produced with the help of cyclocel and several “haircuts” when plants from inside or outside areas, according to season, travel to the packing shed on conveyors. The pots are rotated under blades and the trimmings fall into boxes and are kept in cold storage until used as cuttings four or five per pot. These are laid out on glasshouse areas with bottom heat. Finished plants are also sometimes held back in cold storage for up to 2 months. Marc Bertier had also designed a grader for the plants, which works photo electrically. Great emphasis is given to water preservation and re-circulation. The beds both inside and out are sloped and water recovered is sand bed filtered and treated with UV light.

Group Floreac

This enormous group, still a family business, has companies specializing in four areas. plant breeding and young plant production, pot plant production, interior planting

and the sale and distribution of ornamental plants. It was the latter that we visited. They operate from a gigantic prize-winning building and employ some 250 staff. We watched the consignments being sorted into orders with Danish trolleys fitted with devices to enable computer and radio-controlled movement. The sorting and labeling appeared highly sophisticated. Sales are evenly split between wholesale trade, supermarkets and garden centers. We learnt that some 30% of their sales are to the UK. On display in a very large foyer were examples of their current breeding work and interior decoration ideas.

Day 3

Garden Centre Roegiers

Veronique Rougiers runs her garden center with only two other helping staff apart from her parents. She even does garden designs as well. Uncharacteristically 80% of her sales are from plants. She does close on Tuesdays, but otherwise they are open from 8am to 6.30pm She is enthusiastic about the group of 9 garden centers she has helped to create. They share publicity material with a small section personalized to each centre. They distribute 40,000 leaflets and also send e-mails to customers. She thought further working together of five of them such as purchasing of items might develop. She likes to feature recent introductions of plants such as the new hydrangeas.

Calle-Plant

We were greeted by Marc Calle, who is one of four brothers who run a large nursery stock and container plant production business started in 1889. Apparently 35% of production is still fruit trees some of which we assumed were pears as we learnt that Belgium produces more pears than any other country in Europe. Each brother has specific responsibility for a different farm, some with different soil types. Marc, who had spent a year at Hadlow College showed us round his farm and we saw several striking areas of Marigolds. These were sown as a green crop whose toxins provide some control of nematodes. We saw the undercutting of conifers using a winch and much inter row cultivation is done. They spread the season with controlled cold stores and also darkened shed storage with some humidity control. Certain layering and other tasks were used to keep the staff busy the year round. We were shown the large area of container grown plants and Marc stressed the importance of keeping ahead with newer varieties. Various members of the party purchased a newer Hydrangea paniculata var "Tinky Wink"?

Day 4

PCS Experimental Station for Ornamentals-Destelbergen

Our visit began with a presentation of the work of this research centre for ornamental plants. We were impressed to learn that 80% of the funding was still from Governmental sources, helped we gathered by the rivalry of the tiers of government in Belgium.

Energy saving, the reuse of water and crop protection (including compost tea) are three of the station's areas of research. Their work on glasshouse roses is suggesting that over a four day period, if temperatures are higher in the day the crop could tolerate a slightly lower one at night. This could result in a significant saving for growers in fuel consumption. Work was being done on methods of treating water for purity.

A website helped growers with information and advisory services for water and crop protection are provided.

Outside the glasshouses there was a beautiful block of colour--- a large area of Begonias being grown by a commercial grower but also available for research. The station is staffed by 30 researchers and technicians and four advisers.

PCG Experimental Station for Vegetables-Dienze

Kurt Cornelissen met us at lunchtime and enthusiastically guided us round this vegetable research station. We saw a trial to see whether surrounding a carrot crop with a barrier of maize could reduce carrot fly infestation. We were shown a glasshouse with organically grown tomatoes and running free in the crop were fowls, which were apparently controlling stem root nematodes. They were also trialling rootstocks. Another glasshouse had a trial of lettuce grown hydroponically in gutters which were mobile so the crop could be gradually spaced out as it grew so saving heat in the early stages.

We were shown, too, their “laboratory Kitchen” and the isolated line of cubicles used by panels for flavour and other tests. Special lighting prevented bias by the colour of the product.

Our guide suggested that growers did not do enough to communicate information on their products and the quality of them. He gave the example of the leek crop, which usually has a number of sprays for thrip damage as the customer expects unharmed foliage. But if the customer was better informed he would realize that the thrip damage was only to the foliage, which was not actually consumed so this spraying would not be necessary.

Ypres and The Last Post at the Mennen Gate

From Dienze we headed to Ypres where some saw a war cemetery and most of us a museum depicting the terrors of life in the trenches in the First World War. After an early supper we were amazed to find several hundred at the Mennen Gate where local firemen played the Last Post and various wreaths were laid. This ceremony apparently happens every night at 8pm and has now been enacted over 26,000 times.

Postscript

Many thanks are due for this most enjoyable and wide ranging horticultural tour.

Gillian Bullock's organization was superb ably assisted by Steven. Her friend from her time working at the University of Ghent, Professor Marleen Praet, was a joy to meet and her advice on restaurants meant that we ate superbly even if our waist lines (and perhaps our wallets!) were somewhat stretched. We were privileged to have excellent guides on all our visits except the arboretum. Our tour at night around the older parts of Ghent was also memorable.

On a personal note I would like to thank all those Nuffield Scholars for allowing some horticultural strangers to accompany them. Their friendliness made us feel very welcome on this happy, interesting and enjoyable tour.

Tony Gardener