

INNOVATIONS IN TREE FRUIT PRODUCTION IN ENGLAND, BELGIUM AND THE NETHERLANDS

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On July 24, 2011 a group of 42 IFTA members assembled in Maidstone, England to begin a week long tour of fruit growing enterprises in the southeast of England, The Netherlands and Belgium. Many were escaping triple digit temperatures which were dominating weather patterns in North America and were welcomed by comfortable coolness of England. The first couple of days were centered at the East Malling Research Center, the birthplace of dwarfing rootstocks. Growers were welcomed by EMR Charitable Trust Chair Will Sibley (aka "Grafter Will") who, along with IFTA past president Neil Manly, made arrangements for what was to be an opportunity for participants to see first hand many innovations being tested and practiced at EMR and by growers in the UK and northern Europe. All of us owe a debt of gratitude to the researchers at EMR who developed the first of the size controlling rootstocks known as the Malling series. Clearly "Grafter Will" is working to support the tradition of innovation that EMR is best known for during a time of dramatic change for the research station. EMR is no longer a government supported institution, but rather now a private research facility which survives with contracted research projects funded by a host of private and public resources. As such, some of the work conducted there is proprietary, that is, not open to the public at this time. Change at EMR is the name of the game, and most dramatic is the reduction in staffing from a high of 400 personnel, to presently 40.

At EMR much discussion centered on the "Concept Pear Orchard" with its 4 system comparison trial. Discussions regarding the development of the systems, irrigation management trials, organic production and "Zero residue" systems were featured. Visits to local pear and apple orchards as well as Leeds Castle and Canterbury rounded out the English segment of our visit.

From Maidstone onto Middleberg, Netherlands was our next destination. Our one interruption of our plan occurred while we waited for several hours for a disabled train in the Channel Tunnel to be towed. Things could have been worse if the Burger King at the station didn't serve Budwieser! Midnight arrival at our newly constructed hotel in Middleberg left us no time or energy for the in-room saunas, whirlpool bath or showers built for 6! An early morning departure the next day left us wondering what could have been.

Covered cherry plantings are just being considered in much of North America. While on the post conference IFTA tour this past March we saw a Voens covered dormant orchard in Oregon and now in Netherlands again a Voens covered cherry orchard in the process of being "hibernated", that is, covers being removed and put to rest for the year. With many participants farming in the more humid regions looking for options to prevent rain induced fruit cracking, this stop provided for enthusiastic conversation. Onto Verbeek nursery, one of the many fine fruit tree nurseries of this region. Detailed demonstrations of what it takes to produce and ship first

class apple and pear trees was the highlight of this stop. Next onto an amazing pear orchard, complete with bin train rides thru the manicured orchards. The concept orchard systems demonstrated at EMR earlier in the week were seen as a commercial operation here. Second leaf, third leaf and older trees were dripping with magnificent pears. This was a sight to behold. Pear production now exceeds apple production in Belgium. With the use of Quince C rootstock, intensive systems similar to those used by apple grower is changing the “plant pears for heirs” attitude.

Belgium orchard visits featured a look at their adaptation of the French developed “le Mur fruitier”, or “The fruiting wall”. We were able to visit an orchard where dormant hedging was the pruning system being employed, plus visits to Carolus Nursery and orchards and the PC Fruit Research station outside St Truiden , Belgium. Koen Carolus toured us to several nursery stops where we viewed some of the nursery tree types Koen is developing to produce trees suited specifically to the needs of the particular orchard management systems. Suggesting later that growers utilizing the fruiting wall training system could produce fruit destined for specific markets by adjusting timing and degree of hedging. Too much to see in too short a time. In the next couple of years as labor issues intensify worldwide we’ll be taking a closer look at fruiting walls and other mechanized production systems.

Study tours like this are much of what IFTA is all about. The chance to make new friends and renew old friendships provides opportunities for members to combine intensive education with cultural experience. In my opinion, return on investment of these adventures is high, and not to be missed.