

IFTA Hops the Pond

A group of approximately forty IFTA members participated in this summer's 2011 European Study Tour, which took place in England, the Netherlands and Belgium the last full week of July. The group spent the first three days in and around the region of Maidstone, Kent, located approximately 30 miles southeast of London. Day four was spent in the Netherlands and the final day of the tour took place in Belgium.

East Malling Research (EMR) was the tour's first stop. EMR is probably best known for their apple rootstock breeding program. The material this breeding program has released has without question changed the face of commercial fruit production over the past few decades. They represent research and development that has become truly invaluable to apple growers around the world. Will Siple, chairman of East Malling Trust, and Dr. Peter Gregory were quite generous, sharing their time and knowledge, providing a brief history of the station and arranging for presentations by current researchers at the station. Some of the specific areas currently being studied at EMR include residue-free production, a number of postharvest handling projects, water/resource-use efficiency and interesting work in regards to climate change adaptation. During the outdoor tour of the station the group met with several researchers as well as Graham Caspell, who is the farm manager at EMR. The group learned early in the day about the extreme consumer demand for fruit grown in the UK, and Graham echoed the pressure of this demand. It's a request from an increasing consumer population falling onto a decreasing grower population. And in addition to this, pear acreage in the UK has dropped at least 40% in the past decade or so. In response to this, Graham, borrowing a few ideas from Dutch growers across the channel, has been working with four different systems of high density pear demo plantings, hoping to revive interest in pear production in their UK growers.

The second day began with a tour of GH Dean & Co, a family operation being managed by current generation family member, Oliver Doubleday. Oliver's focus today is on high density cherry production, and he seems to have a personal interest in modifying atmospheric conditions for the storage of cherries. The next stop was Broadwater Farm, a tour led by Peter Checkley. He showed the group their high density apple plantings and also shared the farm's most recent investment of installed solar panels. As the group boarded the bus they were able to see some of the first Bramley coming out of the fields. Bramley is an early, green, very tart apple which is a popular, British variety for its pie-making and other processing qualities. After lunch the tour group headed to Sunnuck's Rankins Farm where they met with fruit grower Tony Sunnuck. Tony is a grower of both apples and pears, currently growing 50 acres of each. Over the past few years he has been partnering with OrchardWorld, one of the UK's top fruit marketers. OrchardWorld financed the establishment of a 7.5 acre high density pear concept planting as well as a 2.5 acre concept apple planting on Sunnuck's farm. The pear orchard (planted 3' x 11' on Quince rootstocks) is currently in its third leaf and Tony hopes to harvest 15-20 bins per acre this season. He is looking to harvest 70 bins per acre when the trees reach full maturity, a far cry from the 20 bin per acre the standard mature pear orchard in the UK has averaged in previous years. This partnership is a good example of how the growers and marketers are reacting and trying to meet the domestic consumer demand mentioned earlier. Day two concluded with a tour and high tea at Leeds Castle, followed by a dinner and a walk through the espaliered gardens at Bradbourne House, generously hosted by the folks at East Malling Trust.

The final morning in the UK was spent with Peter Hall of H.E. Hall & Son, who showed the group around his organic apple concept orchard, also planted in partnership with OrchardWorld. The trees were planted in 2007 at a density of 1200 trees/acre on a post and wire system under drip irrigation. Cultivars planted, chosen based on consumer demand, include Royal Gala, Braeburn, Bramley and Pinova, to name a few. Peter shared some of his organic growing practices, which have to date proven successful in this concept planting. They use weather data, constantly being collected electronically, to monitor apple scab. This

information allows for timely applications of sulphur to manage the disease, and they are extremely vigilant about these applications. Peter is utilizing a novel approach to mating disruption based on the concept of male/auto confusion in order to control codling moth and he uses a soap application (same one he uses in their organic hop garden) to control aphid pests. Fire blight does not seem to be a concern for them, most likely due to their cooler temperatures. So far H.E. Hall & Son have successfully hit their target yields, but Peter couldn't seem to stress enough the importance of timing and attention to detail when it comes to organic production.

The second leg of the tour was spent between the Netherlands and Belgium. The morning in the Netherlands was spent at the farm of Jaco Elenbaas and the tour was given by his son, Johann. The majority of this farm visit was spent in their precocious cherry plantings on Gisela® rootstocks situated under special covering systems. The group also met Peter and Ferdinand of VOEN GmbH & Co. This is the innovative, Germany-based covering company which provided the Elenbaas farm with their current system, and they were there to explain the covering system and field any questions about it. Following this farm visit the group met up with a few folks from Verbeek Nursery, listened to a presentation about the company's background and current work and enjoyed a traditional Dutch lunch. Afterwards the group visited the Verbeek's headquarters, where they saw some of the equipment they use for their many tasks throughout the growing season, including a custom digging machine with grading capabilities built into the backend and a shower used to wash the trees after coming out of the field and again before they are shipped. Henk Nooteboom, the director of sales at Verbeek, also led a tour of their nursery fields where he stressed the importance of some of their very detail-oriented practices. The last visit of the day was to the van Kessel orchard. The stop included an extremely impressive and immaculate planting of Conference pear, which was led by grower Jan van Dijk. When apple prices started dropping a few years ago, many Dutch growers opted to plant pear trees, and now pear acreage actually outnumbers that of apple in the Netherlands.

The final day of the European tour was spent in Belgium and hosted by Koen Carolus of Carolus tree nursery. He has a background in fruit growing and started this company with a vision to produce a ready-to-use tree, adaptable to grower-specified systems. They take this very seriously and even though they are a young company, they are now growing approximately 1.5 million trees annually for their customers. He took the group around their nursery fields full of trees being specially grown for multiple different systems that have become popular with apple and pear growers. After touring his nurseries the group was taken to PC Fruit research station where they saw firsthand some of the different systems being used for pear production. Researchers Tom Decker and Jef Vercammen shared how the station has been working with growers since 2002 to look at seven different pear-training systems and measuring the productivity and profitability of each system.

The study tour wrapped up after a final group dinner in Brussels, and the members traveled their separate ways the next day. The five days were full of knowledge and innovative ideas from another part of the fruit growing world, making for a trip the attendees won't likely soon forget. Special thanks to the organizers from IFTA, as well as those at EMR and everyone else on the other side of the pond that helped to organize such a wonderful, worthwhile tour!