

IPPS Western Region Exchange 2016[©]

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In October 2016, I travelled to the other side of the world and came back a better propagator. When I first heard about the IPPS Western Region exchange offered by the IPPS New Zealand region, I was very excited about the possibility of going but it was surprising to learn of the small number of applications from the IPPS New Zealand region.

My exchange was hosted and co-ordinated by Jim and Andi Connors of Alta Nurseries, San Jacinto, California, the same couple that hosted the 2015 exchange recipient, Kat Scott of Scott Base Nurseries, Whenuapai. I had high expectations before I arrived based on Kat's report and I wasn't disappointed in the slightest. Jim and Andi were wonderful hosts, thoughtfully looking after me during my stay at their condo in Oceanside and at the conference in Phoenix, Arizona.

On the first week of the exchange, I was taken to a different nursery each day in San Diego County and usually given a tour by a manager or owner. Then I would get my hands dirty or wander around by myself. The nursery line up was pretty similar to what Kat had visited the previous year.

With a population of 39 million, California has a few more plants moving about than New Zealand has, so you would expect some of them to come from some large nurseries. Hines was the largest I visited—a multi-site producer for big-box store, Home Depot. The quantity of plants was staggering. Even though I kind of expected it, I still couldn't believe my eyes to see 30-odd trucks waiting to be loaded at the dispatch yard. This was only at Rainbow Valley, one of the four Hines sites, and if that wasn't impressive enough then there's Colorspot, the parent company with 16 production facilities to its name, each at around 100 acres or larger.

However, not all are large. Out the window of Jim's cherry red Dodge Ram I saw plenty of modest, "Mom and Dad" nurseries.

First Step Greenhouses was boutique compared to Hines, growing seedling plugs under 1.5 ha of glass: very memorable for its network of rolling benches with tables that could switch tracks using compressed air.

Village Nurseries was another large multi-site company. At their Escondido facility, I helped with the potting and cuttings. Village had a very low-tech, conveyorless production system. It seemed to be working perfectly fine for them but they may be forced to adapt as the minimum wage for the workers of California is taking a massive hike, from \$10 USD to \$15 USD by 2021.

Olive Hill Greenhouses not only specialises in indoor flowers and foliage, they also specialise in quality, with seven hectares of showroom standard product. The uniformity was mind blowing to witness and it was a great example of the use of Plant Growth Regulators to synchronise flowering.

At my request, Jim added Tree of Life nursery to the itinerary to show me a native, eco-sourced producer. Tree of Life is owned by IPPS member John Bone and Western US IPPS past-president Mike Evans. It was interesting to hear about using fire to help germinate native chaparral species.

At Jim and Andi's Alta Nurseries, I jumped in a truck and helped stack plants California-style using a thin strip of timber at the base of each row to create the perfect angle. The 100 acre nursery had the beautiful backdrop of the San Jacinto mountain range. It was easy to see why Jim is such a revered propagator in the Southwest.

Euroamerican Propagators was another plug tray specialist I visited. I was invited to sit in on a lean manufacturing meeting with the management team. Ardmore Nurseries has recently finished a lean program so I enjoyed the opportunity to see another nursery put

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their thinking caps on and iron out some kinks.

When I wasn't visiting nurseries, I was being spoilt with Andi's cooking and meals out. Oceanside has a beautiful waterfront with a pier that reaches 400 m out to sea. We went to night markets, flash wineries and breweries and I even took a day trip to San Diego to see the Midway Aircraft Carrier Museum and the city's world famous zoo.

Part two of my exchange was the conference in Phoenix, Arizona. The conference was themed "A Different Point of View" and sought to highlight the unique approach to growing the diverse range of plants in Arizona's various climates.

The programme itself was diverse and rich in content. It began with a pre-conference tour of the Museum of Northern Arizona in Flagstaff, where I learned some of the history of the Colorado Plateau.

The next day, the conference kicked off at the Tempe Mission Palms with guest speakers delivering presentations on disease prevention, use of rice hulls as mulch, micro-propagation of *Grevillea* species and commercial propagation of *Cannabis sativa*.

Later, we loaded into buses to visit three nurseries in the area: Zvida Growers, Arid Zone Trees and Greenfields Citrus.

On day two, our speakers' topics were integrated weed management, genetic engineering and dealing with witches broom in Palo Verde—Arizona's threatened state tree.

Tony Shireman, last year's USA exchange in the IPPS New Zealand/Western Region partnership, whom some of you met during his visit, gave a presentation on his New Zealand experience. I also delivered a presentation about myself and my work at Ardmore Nurseries. I'm pleased to say it was well received, with many people afterwards asking me questions and sharing their New Zealand experiences.

Again, we spent the latter half of the day out in the beautiful sunshine, this time going to Desert Tree Farm, Arizona Wholesale Growers and the Desert Botanical Museum.

That evening we had a banquet to celebrate the end of the conference. Guest speaker - author, botanist and plant hunter—Greg Starr kept us entertained with accounts of his journeys to Mexico where he had made a new species description for the unusual *Agave ovatifolia* and brought back many other new species to introduce to the US commercially. It was amazing to see some of these nondescript plants from the desert landscape come to life in cultivation.

The post-conference tour of the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum was a high note to end on. The museum is a combination of botanical garden, aquarium, natural history museum, zoo and art gallery.

A huge thank you to all the IPPS New Zealand members for making my fantastic trip possible, and to those responsible for co-ordinating the exchange with our IPPS Western Region peers.

Thanks also to Jim and Andi Connors and the organising committee of the Western Region conference for making my experience so unforgettable.