

IPPS European Exchange 2019

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Summary

In 2019, I was selected by the IPPS-Southern Region for the Early-Career Professional International Exchange Program to attend the European Region's annual meeting in Stratford-upon-Avon, England. The exchange program was one of the most amazing and impactful experiences of my entire life. I am so grateful for IPPS for giving me this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity,

and for my wonderful hosts, IPPS International Chair Tim Lawrance-Owen and his wife, Annette. I have documented my exchange program experiences in this paper, including the gardens and nurseries I visited, the European Region's conference, and the final days of my trip in London.

INTRODUCTION

In 2016, I attended my very first IPPS Southern Region Annual Meeting in Virginia Beach as one of the Vivian Munday Young Horticulture Professional Scholarship recipients. Working the registration desk was an excellent way to meet many of the members and learn about the opportunities offered by IPPS, including the Charlie Parkerson Student Research Competition and the Early-Career Professional International Exchange Program. By the end of the meeting, I decided to become an IPPS-SR member. The following year, I presented a poster in the student research competition, and in 2018, I gave an oral presentation as one of the finalists in the student research competition and won first place. I applied for the exchange program both years but was not selected. Then in 2019, I finally achieved the goal I had been pursuing since that first meeting in Virginia Beach: I was chosen as the Southern Region representative for the International Exchange Program with the European Region. As they say, the third time's the charm! The exchange program was, without a doubt, one of the best, most amazing and impactful experiences of my entire life. It was truly a priceless, once-in-a-lifetime experience that I will treasure forever, and it was only possible because of IPPS. I am so grateful for the organization, and I am excited to document and share my experience as the 2019 SR representative in this paper.

In 2019, the European Region's annual meeting was held in England, in the charming and historic town of Stratford-upon-Avon. On the evening of October 1, 2019, I departed from the Tampa International Airport and flew through the night to the London Gatwick Airport. I hoped to sleep on the flight, but with my excitement

level so high, sleep remained elusive. Just as I finally began to doze off, we encountered turbulence that lasted nearly an hour and put sleep firmly out of reach. Consequently, I arrived at Gatwick on Wednesday morning feeling quite exhausted and a bit disoriented. My host, IPPS International Chair Tim Lawrance-Owen, met me in the terminal and we walked to his car. To my mild embarrassment, I bumped into him as I automatically moved toward the right front seat. In my sleepless state, I forgot that was the driver's side! We laughed as I went to the correct side, then began the one-hour drive to Tim's home in Chichester.

As soon as we got on the road, the first thing I noticed was all the tall, thick, lush hedges. They were everywhere! I began to feel more awake as I marveled at the rolling green fields—bordered by tall hedges and crossed by low stone walls—and the architecture of the small towns through which we passed. We made several stops, the first of which was at a large garden center which vaguely reminded me of Rural King, but nicer and with more plants. I caught a glimpse of the English Channel from the top of a hill, and then we continued to the small town of Arundel where I saw Arundel Castle and Arundel Cathedral, as well as an incredibly old Catholic church that had been built in the 1300s. By that point though, the exhaustion was returning with a vengeance, so we continued onward and arrived in Chichester around mid-morning.

After a nearly four-hour nap, I felt much better. Tim and I had afternoon tea, then he showed me his lovely backyard garden and his incredible, envy-inducing Alitex greenhouse. His wonderful wife, Annette, returned home shortly thereafter, and

we all went for a walk before dinner. We strolled down a lane to another lush, green, rolling field in which deer were grazing, then walked along a hedge-bordered road before cutting across a different field and returning home (Fig. 1).

We ate an early dinner, as Tim and Annette were having their church group over that evening. Their friends were all

very sweet—one lady even said she loved my accent! But despite my long nap I was still exhausted, so I bid everyone a good-night and retired early. To my relief and delight, I had an excellent, full night of sleep and woke totally refreshed on Thursday morning, ready for my first nursery tour.



Figure 1. A lush, hedge-bordered field near Tim and Annette’s home in Chichester.

Tristram Plants

We started my horticultural tour at Walberton Nursery, from which Tim had just recently retired after nearly 29 years of service. Walberton is one of three nurseries that make up Tristram Plants, which along with Toddington Nursery, form The Farplants Group, a cooperative of businesses and one of the largest wholesale suppliers of outdoor plants in the UK. Walberton

mainly produces ornamentals and has a longstanding, active breeding program that has released many protected/patented varieties over the years. We first visited Walberton’s propagation nursery, where we were given a tour by the propagation manager, Paul Dyer (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. Touring Walberton’s propagation nursery with propagation manager Paul Dyer (top left). Outdoor production at Binsted (top right). Indoor production at Fleurie Nursery (bottom).

From there, we drove a short distance to the main Walberton Nursery, located in a huge complex alongside the other nurseries in the cooperative: Binsted Nursery and Fleurie Nursery. It was at the main nursery that I first noticed how few of the ornamentals I recognized. So many of their plants, like hellebores, just do not grow in Florida’s hot and humid climate. And there were some plants, like hibiscus,

that looked nothing like the tropical hibiscus to which I am accustomed in Florida! We joined some of the horticultural managers and staff of Walberton for their mid-morning coffee break, and then walked over to Binsted Nursery. Binsted produces herbs and bulbs, as well as alpines, succulents, and perennials.

After Binsted, we walked over to Fleurie Nursery. Fleurie had purchased that

production site, which was formerly owned by Starplants, earlier in 2019. They were planning to expand and update the site, at which they primarily grew flowering plants. One of the last stops on the tour was the finishing and dispatch center, which serves all the nurseries in the complex. It was a vast warehouse space which, on dispatch days, would be bustling with plants and people; however, as we visited on a non-dispatch day, it was mostly empty.

RHS Garden Wisley

The next day, my horticultural journey continued at the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) Garden Wisley (Fig. 3). Wisley is the flagship garden of the RHS, one of five gardens the RHS runs, and it is the second most visited garden in the UK after the Royal Botanic Gardens Kew. I must say though that after visiting both of those gardens, I found Wisley to be more impressive than Kew, and it was perhaps my favorite garden of the whole trip.

Shortly after arriving, we met up with Chris Moncrieff, the Head of Horticultural Relations at Wisley, and he gave us a little tour. He showed us the garden's major construction project: RHS Hilltop – The Home of Gardening Science, which is the UK's first dedicated horticultural science center. The construction was in full swing when we visited, and the center finally opened in June of this year (2021).

He showed us the new children's garden, which had been co-designed by The Duchess of Cambridge, and took us through the Glasshouse, including some of the “behind the scenes” areas. While in the tropical zone of the Glasshouse, I finally saw a lot of plants I recognized!



Figure 3. Visiting the RHS Wisley Garden.

Chris bought us coffee, and after chatting some more, he left us to continue exploring on our own. Tim and I spent the rest of the day meandering around the garden. They had an amazing bonsai collection, and I particularly enjoyed their Fruit Collections and Orchard, as well as the Rock Garden and Pinetum. We left Wisley late in the afternoon. On the way home, we stopped in the South Downs National Park—a range of chalk hills—and hiked a short distance to the top of a hill, which gave a great aerial view of a nearby town and lots of lush, hedge-bordered fields.

Historic Chichester

The following day, Saturday, Tim and Annette showed me around historic Chichester. I was stunned to learn that Chichester had been a Roman settlement as far back as 43 CE. We went to a neat museum that had been built on top of some Roman ruins. The middle of the museum was open and looked down onto the ruins, and all kinds of Roman artifacts and mosaics were displayed around the perimeter. Some of the original wall that surrounded the Roman settlement still survived, and you could walk along the raised walkway, which gave an excellent view of people's long, narrow backyard gardens.



Figure 4. Cilantro (left) and basil (right) at Vitacress.

The production facility we visited was absolutely massive, covering multiple acres, and entirely indoors. It was at Vitacress that I first learned that the UK and European Union have much different and stricter regulations when it comes to pesticides, especially for edible crops. Rather than relying on conventional chemical controls, Vitacress had very strict cultural management practices and disease control programs, and they also used some biopesticides and other biological control agents.

We visited the Chichester Cathedral, which had existed on that site in one form or another since 1075. We ended the day with a walk around Wittering Beach. It was quite lovely, but as a native Floridian, I am a bit spoiled when it comes to beaches!

Vitacress

After spending all day Sunday working on homework and practicing my presentation for the conference, my horticultural journey resumed Monday with a tour of Vitacress. Vitacress is one of the largest producers of leafy greens and culinary herbs for UK supermarkets (Fig 4).

The general cleanliness and lack of pests/disease were especially impressive given the size of the operation. Vitacress also had very impressive equipment and automation throughout the facility.

West Dean Gardens and Drive to Stratford-upon-Avon

On Tuesday, I said my goodbyes to Annette, and we started the three-hour drive to Stratford-upon-Avon. On the way out of town, we picked up James, one of the 2019 “6-

packers,” which is basically the European Region’s equivalent of the Vivian Munday work scholarship program. Six young people (which is why they call them 6-packers!) are selected from a pool of applicants to work at the conference, helping set up, doing registration, introducing speakers, et cetera. With James in tow, we stopped at West Dean Gardens, the gardens on the estate of West Dean House, an old English manor (Figs. 5 and 6). While Wisley and Kew were obviously amazing, I think West Dean is tied with Wisley as my favorite garden of the whole trip. I absolutely loved it!

It was pure English, with beautiful rolling green hills dotted by grazing sheep, a sunken garden, a walled garden, Victorian glasshouses, a pergola, incredible espaliers, and lush hedges. It also had this great exhibit of old-timey gardening and lawn equipment, like old sprayers and an assortment of antique mowers and seeders. I wish we could have stayed longer, but with hours of driving still ahead of us, we had to get back on the road.



Figure 5. Part of the Walled Garden at West Dean Gardens.



Figure 6. Sheep grazing in the Parkland at West Dean Gardens (left). The 300-foot Edwardian Pergola at West Dean Gardens (right).

We arrived in Stratford in the late afternoon. I was introduced to Karl O’Neil, who was then serving as site chairman and Vice President of the European Region. I also met the rest of the 6-packers, and I helped them put together name tags and information packets

IPPS European Region Conference

The conference itself was held the 9th thru the 11th, with presentations in the morning all three days, and nursery tours in the afternoon on the first two days. The 2019 theme was “technical times,” and many of the presentations centered on the growing number of challenges faced by growers in the UK and EU. And just a note: the conference was held during a rather tumultuous time in the UK, right in the middle of the Brexit negotiations. The deadline to leave the EU had already been pushed back twice, and there were some pretty major terms of the withdrawal agreement that had not yet been finalized. It was very interesting to talk with the IPPS members about Brexit and hear the different opinions about it. I am curious how they feel now on the other side of Brexit, and if any of those opinions have changed!

The presentations covered a range of topics. One of the presenters spoke about developing biofungicides to replace some of the fungicides that could no longer be used, while another talked about helping growers get the best out of biopesticides to sustainably protect their crops. Another speaker covered a topic that is very relevant to US horticulture as well: trying to find a suitable replacement for peat in growing media and developing peat-free blends. A couple of presentations focused on using

for the conference attendees. That night, I had dinner with the conference committee members, 6-packers, and a few other early arriving members at a fantastic restaurant right on the River Avon.

technology to improve efficiency and reduce inputs, especially optimizing water and fertilizer use. And there was an interesting presentation about the future of plastics in plant production, and the development of recyclable standard nursery pots in the UK. I gave my presentation right before lunch on the first day, which was perfect because I was able to introduce myself as the exchange program representative and share a bit about my academic and horticultural background with everyone at the same time. That put me in the unique position of being known to everyone at the conference, which made it much easier to meet the members. With perhaps 100 members in attendance, the conference was quite a bit smaller than the typical southern region meeting, so by the end of it, I think I spoke with everyone there at least once.

The first nursery we visited was New Leaf, a wholesale nursery that specialized in producing Clematis and climbing plants (Fig. 7). We were greeted by a very excited Labrador Retriever named Bella when we arrived, and she joined us for most of the tour.

From there, we went to Newey Avoncross, commercial contract growers of bedding plants (Fig.8).



Figure 7. New Leaf, specialist producers of Clematis and climbing plants.



Figure 8. A glasshouse of pansies at Newey Avoncross.

At that time of year, they were basically only growing violets and pansies. Their nursery was incredibly tidy and orderly, and they had some impressive equipment and automation as well. On the second day, we visited Bordon Hill, a production facility part of Ball Colegrave, which is Ball Horticultural Company's leading wholesale distributor in the UK (Fig.9). They grow ornamental plants from both seed and cuttings. The facilities were huge, and almost the entire nursery was connected by tracks so that benches could be moved from one area to another as needed. There was a very effective use of information systems and technology at the facility. Every tray or container was tagged with a barcode and tracked throughout its production life, and they had high-tech sensors throughout the greenhouses that monitored all kinds of environmental conditions, plus leaf temperature and vapor pressure deficit. Moreover,

they had some of the most impressive equipment and automation I have seen in a nursery. They had a machine that filled trays with media and one that sowed seeds. Another scanned trays to detect cells in which seeds had not germinated, then it would remove the growing media from those cells with targeted puffs of air before filling them with a rooted plantlet. My favorite machine transferred plugs from trays to larger containers—it was mesmerizing to watch. The final nursery we toured was Hawkesmills Nurseries, which grows more than a thousand varieties of perennials, herbs, grasses, ferns, and vegetables (Fig. 10). They had just finishing constructing a brand-new glasshouse—it still had that shiny new feel to it, like a new car—and it was fun seeing so many different types of plants in one production space.



Figure 9. Poinsettias at Bordon Hill, part of Ball Colegrave.



Figure 10. The brand-new glasshouse at Hawkesmill Nurseries.

On the final day of the conference, there were a few more presentations in the morning, and then we all had one final lunch together in the early afternoon before everyone went their separate ways. It was bittersweet saying goodbye to everyone as lunch wrapped up, as I had really gotten to know some of the members in those brief few days.

Saying goodbye to Tim was the most difficult, as he had been such a wonderful host and guide during the first part of my trip (Fig. 11). But he had to get home to Annette, so we said our goodbyes and I was on my own.



Figure 11. Big smiles and bittersweet farewells with Tim on the final day of the conference.

London

After 10 days of meeting new people, networking, and constantly interacting with others, my introverted self was looking forward to spending the last few days of the trip on my own. It was also exciting because it was the first time in my life that I was traveling solo. I had decided to stay an extra night in Stratford to do a little sightseeing, but the first thing I did was look up a local laundromat, as I desperately needed to wash my clothes if I even hoped of getting everything back in my suitcase! Once that was done, I explored the town and did a bit of souvenir shopping. I saw Shakespeare's birthplace and a Shakespeare memorial with statues of his best-known characters, then strolled along the river before dinner.

I left Stratford early the next morning on a charter bus bound for London. Even though it took most of the day, I enjoyed the drive because I got to see parts of England I probably would not have seen otherwise. I arrived at my Airbnb in Hammersmith in the late afternoon, and after a full day of traveling, I decided to take it easy so I could get an early start the next day. On a whim though, I looked up the play *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*. Amazingly, they had very reasonably priced tickets available for a showing the next day, so I bought them.

The next morning, I went to the Natural History Museum. It opened at 10 AM, which left me with only an hour and a half to explore before I had to leave for the play, so I picked one exhibit I really wanted to see: the Hall of Minerals and the jewel collection in The Vault. The two-part, five-hour play was at the Palace Theatre, a beautiful and historic theatre in the Westminster borough of London. The theatre was too far from the museum to walk, so I hailed one of

the famous black London cabs, which made me feel rather fancy. When I found my seat, I could not believe how amazing it was: I was only a few rows back from the stage, and no one tall sat in front of me. The play was incredible—I cried at least twice!

On the penultimate day of my trip, I spent the morning at Kensington Palace, which was holding a special exhibit celebrating the 200th anniversary of Queen Victoria's birth. That afternoon, I made my way to the Royal Botanic Gardens Kew (Figs. 12 and 13). One of the 6-packers from the conference, Charles Shi, was currently interning at Kew, and had offered to give me a tour. I met him at one of the staff entrances, and he gave me a brief tour and bought me lunch, then left me to explore on my own. Of course, Kew was amazing! I especially enjoyed seeing the iconic Palm House, and the Temperate House was beautiful, too. I really enjoyed walking through the Princess of Wales Conservatory: it has 10 different climate zones, each containing a variety of plants that thrive in that climate. However, I was shocked to see a couple of plants growing—on purpose—at Kew. In the Princess of Wales Conservatory, they were growing cat's claw vine (*Dolichandra unguis-cati*). It became my archnemesis when I worked as a gardener at Bok Tower Gardens in central Florida, and it is a Category I invasive in Florida, which is the worst level of invasive. In the Waterlily House, they were growing what some people call balsam apple, but I have always called stink vine (*Momordica charantia*), and it is a Category II invasive in Florida. But I suppose one person's invasive weed is another person's botanic garden specimen!



Figures 12. The exterior (left) and interior (right) of the iconic Palm House at Kew.



Figures 13. The desert zone in the Princess of Wales Conservatory at Kew (top). Chihuly sculpture in the Waterlily House at Kew (bottom).

On the morning of my final day in England, October 15th, I went on a one-hour horseback ride through Hyde Park (Fig. 14). I am and always will be a “horse girl,” so cantering through Hyde Park was absolutely magical.

I rode past the site of Winston Churchill’s home, and I even saw several horses from the Queen’s Household Cavalry being exercised in the park. Once my ride was over, I quickly packed the rest of my things and hustled to the London Victoria Station and took the Gatwick Express train to the Gatwick Airport. And just like that, my trip was over.

Closing Remarks

Words cannot adequately express how deeply and extraordinarily grateful I am that I was able to go on this trip. Every part of it was wonderful. I saw so many incredible places and things, met so many incredible people, learned so much about horticulture overseas, and made memories that I will cherish forever. It was truly a priceless, once-in-a-lifetime experience, an invaluable gift that IPPS gave to me. And then, when I think of how the whole world changed just a few short months later...I cannot even begin to describe how lucky, and thankful, and blessed, I feel to have had those experiences before COVID changed everything. I am so, so grateful for IPPS and its support of the exchange program, and I sincerely hope that as soon as things return to some semblance of normal, the Southern and European Regions will resume the exchange program, because it is truly a program worth supporting. Thank you, IPPS, for everything.



Figure 14. Horseback ride through Hyde Park on the final day of the exchange program.