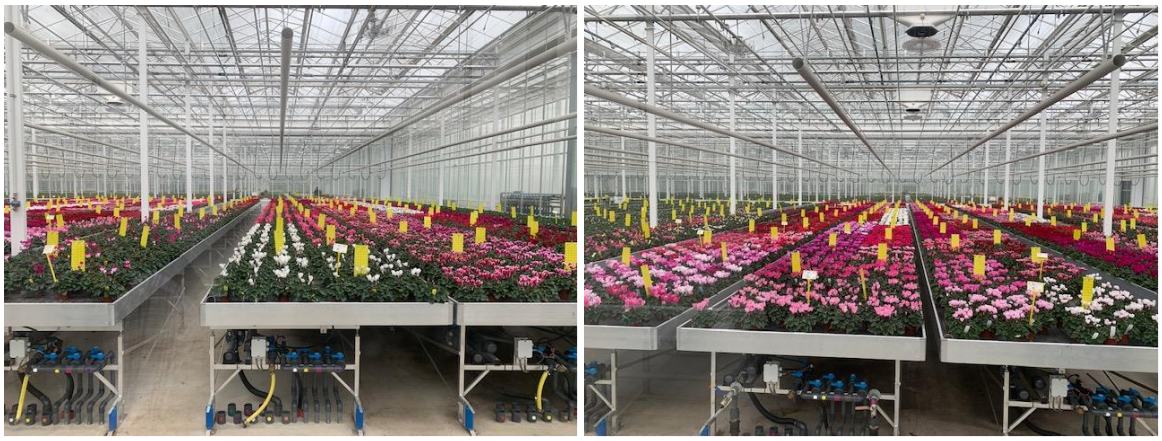
Study Tour to Europe (Netherlands and Germany)

A group of 12 travelled to Europe between 25th-29th September visiting growing, breeding, young plant and research facilities covering a range of crop types.

The group were warmly welcomed at each location first visiting Schoneveld at their new purpose-built breeding facility near to Twello. As well as seeing their main crop types (e.g cyclamen, campanula, ranunculus) glimpses were given to the new breeding lines (e.g gerbera).There main open days for cyclamen will be in weeks 44/45. This was their new site built in the last couple of years and it was clear a great deal of attention to detail had been afforded to the design. Over 8 separate feeding systems were installed – not just to provide optimum fertigation but to improve their sustainability through less waste by controlled recirculation of separate feed types.



Overview of their cyclamen trials ahead of their open days in weeks 44/45

After taking lunch at Emsflower we were shown around (on bike or golf buggy) their extensive bedding/garden plant production nursery on the German border. They were in the process of completing and commissioning their latest investment in a 16Mw (heat) and 4Mw (electric) biomass boiler (steam) which in the current energy climate would prove invaluable as energy cost rise from <20 euro cents to >60 euro cents per KwHr in January. The production facility is immense with production capacities to match (50,000 pots per hour per transplanting line). This is to ensure there is a rapid crop turnaround of bedding crops in the peak season. Current crops viewed included garden chrysanthemum in various unit sizes and bloom chrysanthemums, as well as poinsettia ranging in 12cm to 2L pots and which over 90% were being grown in peat free substrates.


Recently spaced 12cm poinsettia and closing stages of the instal of 16Mw biomass boiler

On the following day the group visited Kotterhenrich which started in damp weather. This company specialises in hydrangea production from supply of un-rooted cuttings through to 14cm product starting in week 50 and running throughout Spring and into early Summer. Annual production exceeds 10M units. They continue to breed new varieties as part of the Hydrangea Breeders Association and the group saw new breeding within the paniculata type of hydrangea. Issues of energy costs were discussed (again) with the understanding that many growers were less likely to "force" their crops early season with heat/light and switch more to natural season production. Kotterhenrich were open in their view that many nurseries/industry had benefited from the "cheap" Russian gas, but the tide had turned. Kotterhenrich were fortunate to be able to switch to use oil and coal and generally they viewed the energy crisis as more of a 'bump' in the road which would be rode out over the next 1-2 years. There was more concern towards the general economic climate and the pressure on the pennies in peoples pockets and would they continue to spend on plant gifts?


Paniculata breeding and testing grounds, and just part of the outdoor production beds which over the course of the next 4 weeks would all be lifted into cold storage.


View of the indoor propagation benches and the group braving the rather inclement weather outdoors

In the afternoon, after a very nice lunch hosted by Heuger, the group visited the hellebore specialist which for the last 20+ years has bred an increasing range of premium hellebore varieties. With annual production in excess of 10 million plants, the groups saw both 7L large Ice Rose varieties just about to shipped through to the young plant weaning process from tissue culture in a purpose-built glasshouse facility.

Josef also introduced us to Saxifraga Dancing Pixies – a new plant from South Asia they had started breeding some years ago and was now available commercially in limited numbers


Potted hellebores in pots grown throughout the summer under glass and Dancing Pixie viewed on the right

On the last full visit day the group were warmly welcomed by Dummen in bright sunshine where we were shown through their breeding facility which included strict hygiene controls.

Viewing over 17,000 poinsettia seedlings Dummen explained the breeding process from seed to product and the time it took as well as the magic ingredient to ensure poinsettia broke freely. Dummen disclosed the range of breeding objectives they have within poinsettia – including whitefly resistant varieties and cold tolerant varieties (10-12C temperatures).

Further discussions included a general overview of the activities of Dummen and primarily the changing market conditions which provides both challenges and opportunities to growers. Reference was made to the energy crisis which is expected to drastically cut back the likes of Orchid production which is estimated as a shortfall of 45M plants within Europe next year.

The final visit was to Straelen Horticultural Research Station where Peter Alt, a friend of Harry's for over 20 years continues to carry out commercially relevant research for the European horticultural industry – something sadly lacking in the UK. The station continues to provide a focus for growers to

come together and discuss their challenges and agree a programme of research projects which can support them. Themes of research included runoff from nurseries and the use of novel methods for minimising fertiliser use, primarily phosphate which can 'pollute' ground waters/rivers. There were peat free trials on poinsettia, whilst longer terms trials continued with more novel crops – including Papaya. Although with its high energy demands, this crop was likely to be pulled after 2 years production, but demonstrated the rapid changes that can take place in horticulture today.

Fascinating to see Papaya production under glass whilst more relevant projects on poinsettia included peat free testing. Poinsettias were closely inspected!

The group would like to extend its thanks to all the growers and organisations we were lucky to visit and for the professional organisation of the visit by Harry Kitchener and the team at BGA (Stacie and Rachel). The study was supported by the AHDB who provided financial resource and assistance for travel arrangements.

Thanks to all those whom attended the tour which I hope (and expect) all were able to take away some important lessons and information to sue on their own nurseries!