

Belgium

FCI also visited the bedding and pot plants specialist, Rudy Raes bloemzaden n.v.

Begonias and much more

Rudy Raes is the third generation owner of his family run company, he is renowned for his originality in driving forward a *selective* formula for his clients, ultimately supplying a wide-range of seeds and seed-raised, as well as vegetatively propagated, young plants. During a visit to the Raes nursery in Destelbergen the dedication surrounding the plant selections, which originate from both Rudy's own breeding programs and those of third party breeders, is revealed inside the highly automated greenhouses and an 8,000 m² trial garden. "It is around 30 years ago that my specialisation in the bedding plants sector began," explains Raes, "first expanding on our range of begonias, where my grandfather had become one of the first nurseries in Europe to start growing young plants for local growers and my father had worked in advance of the market on fragranced begonia." The pioneering tradition has continued under Raes' management; firstly he transferred the plug production seen through his connections with PanAmerican Seed in Chicago back to his own nursery and five years later started his own trial work of breeder genetics. Born into the seed business, Rudy and his son Thierry, the fourth generation, have also adapted to the increasing importance of vegetatively propagated young plants during the last 12 years. "Our own judgement

by Anabel Evans



Rudy Raes with one of his latest begonia breeding selections.

of bedding and pot plants, ornamental grasses and culinary herbs is used to create the products sold under the Rudy Raes® trademark. We are completely open with the breeding companies about our goal to *select the best* for our clients," explains Raes.

Automated precision

Inside the greenhouse, automation is the key word for the processing operations to sow seeds, germinate the seedlings and organise client orders for dispatch. You quickly come to understand the company slogan, '*perfection in selection, selection means perfection*', as Raes points to the newest seeding machine where the momentary still-setting of the tray ensures that each seed is positioned in the centre of the cell; the benches full of seeded trays are subsequently transferred by an overhead, automated system to the germination department of the greenhouse where water droplets (10µ) are circulated by ventilators to maintain the correct humidity. After germination the seedling trays are run through a TTA photographic

assisted selection machine to ensure each cell is filled with a germinated seedling. "We are starting to work with a new 288-plug tray for seeds and will be replacing our TTA selection machine, after 11 years, with a revised version where the trays can be processed 2.5 times quicker by turning the trays through 90° and increasing the working length of the blow-out section," adds Raes. The final logistics process for the dispatch of multi-product orders per client has also been carefully automated by the numbering of each rolling bench and the bar-coding of each tray. Raes comments, "Our logistics management throughout the young plant production is critical to the timely dispatch of seasonal orders where we see a continuing trend in the demand for larger plugs later in the season as growers seek to save on their energy costs." Raes also supplies mail order companies to extend his production season.

Impressive trial garden

Moving into the open-air trial garden, where every year Raes creates an impressive show of Rudy Raes®

Belgian exports

Apart from 400 ha (open air and under glass) of azalea cultivation with an export value of € 30.6 million in 2007, the Belgian export of ornamental horticultural products is also represented by indoor plants (€ 127.8 million), bedding plants (€ 50.5 million), nursery stock (€ 106.3 million), cut flowers (€ 63.7 million), foliage (€ 59.4 million), flower bulbs and tubers (€ 21.4 million), cuttings (€ 32 million) and seeds for sowing (€ 26.9 million).

by Kerry Herndon

Making Cents

Dr Charles Hall, the current holder of the Ellison chair in International Floriculture at Texas A&M, runs a blog that brings the world of economics to interested parties in horticulture. As a trained economist and educator, Dr Hall offers the knowledge and skills to help us through the vast sea of news and separate what is important from what is not important. The most recent blog posting I got over the Labor Day weekend was a power point from a Harvard Business Review article called "Seven Ways to Fail Spectacularly".

The blogs that I subscribe to have covered a lot of different topics and frequently provide information on the larger economy, but Dr Hall's blog Making Cents adds context that allows even us non-economists to get more meaning from the data. The numbers you get from the news seem to change frequently and knowing what they mean is a real challenge. Having Dr Hall help out by bringing floral into the larger economic picture makes things a lot easier to digest and understand. Dr Hall has some strong opinions on topics of importance to growers and retailers. I do not always agree with his advocacy, but it is certain that he has put the interests of the floral community first and is trying to educate us as best he can. Dr Hall thinks prices have to go up, I think we have to be more efficient. Maybe we are both right.

In this recent blog posting was a link to a video about how local coffee shops are effectively competing with Starbucks. I assume Dr Hall is sharing this with us because the parallels to garden centres and big boxes are obvious. The message was "don't protest, just compete". It is a good message and one we don't hear from the mainstream media. To them, it is not news that small companies can out-manoeuvre big ones in a local setting. Individually I suppose that is true, but when you aggregate many small coffee shops succeeding in a Starbucks world it is news... it's just not reported.

In July, Dr Hall gave us subscribers a 12-point list of things to do in a down economy. In the same month, there were articles on the current economy and prior recessionary periods, immigration issues, and the rise of the global middle class. While not every article is of immediate importance to you, many are. The blog site has links to the past years' blogs by month and topic, so you can look at what you want... ellisonchair.blogspot.com.

Blogs are kind of new to me, just as many of the fast moving technologies are. They are getting a lot of attention because they bypass the traditional media. Individuals of a particular expertise can now share their knowledge with people interested. Last week a high school friend now living in Switzerland and working as a bank security programmer told me that he no longer subscribes to any technical journals. If he has a difficult problem with some code, he posts the issue at a blog site catering to people like him. He told me the answer comes much faster than it ever has before, arriving often in just minutes.

Making Cents is part of a larger phenomenon of information available through the internet. The nice thing about Making Cents, though, is that you have a full-time economist working for you for free.

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This summer Raes was honoured by an invitation from the Palace of Versailles to supply the bedding plants necessary to decorate Split-Rocker, a 13 m-high piece of art by the American artist Jeff Koons showing a pony on the left and a dinosaur on the right.



The impressive 8,000 m² trial garden.

selected plants for visiting clients and the Annual Open Days held around mid-August, time is a necessity to observe all the improved and new selections; this year the highlights included the compact Begonia semperflorens F1 Mascotte Scarlet improved, the Begonia F1 Cameleon, plus experimental specimens of trailing petunia from seed and zinnias. "I am convinced about the outstanding quality of trailing petunias from seed and believe that the growers will be encouraged by this option if we supply the young plants in a cutting plug size," comments Raes. Finally, while Raes' own breeding program for begonias is continually developing, with Begonia Fragrance being noted as a highly promising addition to the range and currently an exclusive product for

Jardin Express in France, he is also passionate about a refinement project involving primulas. "Our goal in our early Evie and late Tobie series is to create a wide range of colours on compact plants, avoiding the need for plant growth regulators," says Raes. The primula selections also include the small-flowered Mister and Miss Gold Lace, quite popular in England, as well as the Starlight with a unique Flame Mix of 14 special bi-colours. Also, there is the latest flowering primrose on the market, Cabaret, flowering from March through April. A real newcomer is a winter bloomer series, called Rubens; a double flowering primrose available in eight colours, flowering from mid February to April and distinguished from existing double primulas by its compactness. ■■■