

Report from the OHA Convention 2019

The OHA Convention was hosted by District 11 comprised of Essex, Chatham-Kent, Lambton with the theme “Come to the Deep South where everything Grows. “ Representatives from societies all over Ontario gather for this event and I’m proud to say our society was well represented by four members.

After some business on Saturday morning, our Plenary Speaker was Matt Korpan who is the Senior Grower for Nature Fresh Farms in Leaming. His topic was Feeding our World, Greenhouse Growing. Matt has had a deep love of gardening since childhood and has been working in the greenhouse industry since 2013. He has exposure and experience in a wide variety of crops and growing practices.

Leamington is home to over 60% of Ontario’s greenhouses and in fact, the area’s greenhouse acreage is larger than the entire U.S. greenhouse industry combined. It is the hub of the largest concentration of greenhouses in North America with nearly 2,000 acres “under cover”. The main crops grown are tomatoes, seedless cucumbers and peppers but they are expanding to include lettuce and soft fruits such as strawberries, raspberries, and blackberries. The majority of these products are shipped to the USA although some do make it to grocery shelves in Canada.

Why is greenhouse growing the way of the future? Matt described it as no longer growing food by farming but by science. In the greenhouse, they have an extended season, literally year—round. They can control almost everything (short of a computer breakdown)! Computers control temperature, moisture, fertilizer requirements and pests. Computers tell them when plants need more water on a hot day, less water on an overcast day and overnight. The technology is becoming so advanced, they run graphs constantly to determine what the plants’ water and food needs are. They have robots to pick crops and have a train running throughout the greenhouse. They constantly trap bugs to determine the variety and number and introduce sacrificial plants that will attract the bugs away from the crops. They have beehives in all the greenhouses for pollination.

The greenhouses now are enormous. Many cover 30 to 50 acres and newly constructed greenhouses will cover 100 acres. Not inexpensive to build, these glass houses cost anywhere from \$500,000 to \$1 million to build. They have become very energy efficient in the last 20-30 years. They use diffused glass with antireflective coating so that the light is captured and used by the crops. In greenhouses they can produce 75kg of produce per square meter versus 20 kg. meter for a field crop and they use fewer chemicals. All crops are grown hydroponically and products are non GMO certified. Water usage is significant, each greenhouse has three 500,000 L tanks, however, no water is wasted, it is gathered, disinfected and reused. The

company uses biodegradable packaging and the many job opportunities they create are in the technology field as opposed to labouring jobs.

Matt made an amazing PowerPoint presentation and was a fascinating speaker. It's no wonder he looks at his job as a way to supply the world with healthy sustainable produce. Certainly the way of the future!

Val Gillespie