

HMA 2000: Expanding Into a Vision

Text and photos by Douglas J. Peckenpaugh

The Third Annual Hydroponic Merchant Association's (HMA) Conference headed north to Canada this year, flooding the Richmond, British Columbia, area from June 9-12 with hydro gurus from around the world. Booths were erected. Speeches were delivered. Products and services were hawked. New connections were made and established relationships were reinforced. Old friends greeted each other warmly and countless new faces wove themselves into the fibers of this once small, tightly knit group. And then, after all of the booths had been broken down and the convention floor deserted, only an intangible—and strangely out of place—emotion still lingered: anticipation.

Why, after all was said and done, did a yearning still permeate so many trailing conversations? By the end of the weekend, I had heard the word "future" so many times that I wondered if I'd dipped into the pages of a Philip K. Dick novel. How could so many people tangibly discuss something that hadn't happened yet? I admit that I was as guilty as anyone else in prognosticating. But it wasn't without foundation.

After years of slow, steady growth, the hydroponic industry finally appears to be ready to break through the barriers of conventional agriculture. Formerly traditional farmers convert to sustainable growing in droves every year. They see the profit potential of controlled environment agriculture and leave the unpredictability of soil-based, outdoor crops in the dust. Likewise, the hobbyist market is expanding exponentially. And the educational sector is continually opening up to the possibilities of hydroponics in the classroom. Those who have grown with the industry have known the intrinsic beauty and potential of hydroponics for years. Now they are finally starting to see substantial public realization. A swell of momentum has been mounting. Pulses were racing all weekend.

Portents of the industry's readiness were everywhere. Industry leaders such as General Hydroponics, American Hydroponics,

and Hydrofarm continue to refine their visions as evidenced by their evolving product lines. The number of exhibitors this year skyrocketed to 70, compared to around 40 last year. Retailers—one of the sectors of the industry that was somewhat underrepresented at the conference—and wholesalers continue to expand into new areas and develop a wider customer base. The dissemination of information is continual and the public is starting to internalize the news—they're getting hooked on hydroponics. The future of the industry is starting to come into focus.

Wait a minute—I'm doing it again. Back to the present. Or at least that past weekend.

Much of an event like this is centered around networking. Considering the lucrative climate of hydroponics these days, everyone wants to maximize their business base. Product exposure plays an important part. As expected, a wide range of new merchandise from established industry veterans was on display. However, some up-and-comers—such as Ted Marchildon, the inventor of the ingenious Omega Garden—managed to gain





some quality exposure. Marchildon has designed a garden that defies gravity. A rotating cylinder houses rows of plants that grow toward the interior light source, making phototropism a phenomenon of the past. The Omega Garden screams to be put to the test in space.

In order for any industry to evolve, its education must be ongoing. The conference featured several informative sessions presented by speakers from across the hydroponic board. The dollars and cents side of the fence was addressed on Saturday in talks on "How to Increase Market Share and Profitability in the Face of Ever-Stronger Competition," by successful Canadian retailer Donald Cooper; "Staff Recruitment and Training in the Hydroponic Retail/Distribution Industry," by Hydroshop's Jim Delaney from Australia; and others. The hydroponic industry is in the midst of a revolution. Although mom and pop are still present in the economic halls of hydro, many business owners who were once simply a storefront operation have expanded beyond their wildest dreams. Larger market shares and client bases

inevitably yield elevated economic complexity. The conference provided a forum for business owners and operators to share ideas and learn how to perform at their peak.

But the bottom line is really about how to efficiently grow superior food. Viable growing solutions for a diverse range of vegetables, fruits, herbs, and other crops are always being researched and developed. On Sunday, the technical sessions were led by Dr. Lynette Morgan from Santeq Consultants in New Zealand, who spoke on the importance of silica and other beneficial elements in hydroponic crop production and France's William Texler from General Hydroponics Europe, who outlined "Niche Crops for Hydroponics." The cache of crops ready for commercial growers continues to expand every year.

This was the largest HMA conference ever, with over 340 attendees representing 11 countries, including Australia, England, France, Germany, Mexico, New Zealand, Romania, Slovakia, and The Netherlands. For many of those in attendance, this was their first HMA conference. It is unlikely that it will be their last.

The core of the hydroponic industry may have a little snow on the roof, but they're not melting into obscurity. They were once young, eager pioneers of hydroponics. Now they're leading the industry. And looking around the conference floor at so many fresh faces, it was obvious that the foundation for tomorrow is being established. Next year's conference from June 22-27 at the Sheraton Laval, Quebec, Canada, is bound to be even bigger. Mark your calendars now and get on the bus. This community grows more every year and every sector has something to offer—we're all in this together. ☘

Douglas J. Peckenpaugh is the editor of *The Growing Edge*.

Opposite page: Industry members set up booths on the trade show floor to display their wares. Agro Dynamics, Inc. is the exclusive North American distributor of Grodan rockwool. Above: Ted Marchildon, the inventor of the Omega Garden, chats about his exciting new growing system. Right: Industry leaders, such as George Van Patten (right), creator of the popular Gardening Indoors series, were in attendance at HMA 2000.

