

## HRM Greenhouse Tour - *Bernie McKenna*

Date: Wednesday, February 12<sup>th</sup>

Place: HRM Greenhouse, 62 Caledonia Rd. Dartmouth

Weather: Inside event, weather almost non applicable

Leader: Jill Burke

Participants: 18

Wednesday, February 12th came in very cold (- 11C) and windy, but the opportunity to have a greenhouse tour was so very, very welcome and appealing. We had 16 adults and 2 little folks with us, and I can say from feedback that everyone was very impressed. Greenhouse Supervisor Chris Redmond, met us, gave us a hearty welcome and ushered us inside to a warmer temperature. Here he introduced us to Jill Burke (Crew Chief / Grower) and Denise Watters (Grower). Jill was our primary guide for the tour and once our whole crew had arrived, she took the time to give us a good idea of what to expect, what to be aware of, a few potential hazards and the general workings of the greenhouse. Jill explained that the two HRM greenhouses are responsible for their own side of the harbour. Apparently, the Public Gardens has a separate facility of its own.



Being well briefed we started the tour in a counterclockwise direction, and pretty much the first plant, we saw was a large Camphor Basil, (most of a meter high) and certainly not the normal herb garden plant, it stood out both in size and taste, definitely woke up my taste buds. From there it was a counterclockwise trip around the greenhouse, and we were on to the Tropicals, some of which never leave the greenhouse, while others are farmed out to various HRM sites for the warmer seasons. Some of these Tropicals were easily 12 or more feet in height. They included Palms trees, Banana trees, and a Bird of Paradise that had one 10 inch flower which had gone to seed and another flower that was just coming on. Jill took the time to explain how the Palm trees that had been planted at Sullivans Pond had most likely succumbed to the fluctuating temperatures of our climate. She told us how the humidity level and temperatures of the facility were so very critical to their plant's survival and general well being. Just past the Tropicals were a large expanse of perennial/hardy plants, pretty much all of which were in individual pots and very healthy, looking specimens. There were 3 different ferns, Asparagus, Fox and Boston, all of them looking so green and happy in their individual pots. While here Jill explained it's a constant battle to stay ahead of invasive insects and disease. Their prevalent insect treatments are organic, one is mainly for thrips and the other the more general Safer's Soap Spray.



Later on, Denise showed how they also use a diluted Safer's Soap bath for disinfecting cuttings prior to planting. Some of the perennials in stock were, Miranda Trees, Hibiscus, Banana plants and a Lemon plant, the latter has flowered, bore fruit but the fruit never did ripen. Further along this row were Eucalyptus, several sedums and a 9 or 10 foot Cactus that looked like it

should have been in a desert somewhere. Jill told us Seamore the Turtle on the lower end of the Dartmouth Canal was originally planted in annual sedums, they have since switched to perennial sedums to reduce the upkeep and thus cost.

Among other plants along here were Giant Elephant Ear plants (about 9 feet high and having leaves 5 feet long and 4 feet wide). There were Echeveria (Hen and Chicks) succulents of various colours and heights, they are often used with other plants to make the bed displays we see throughout HRM. A few others we saw were, arid loving Agave plants (Mother in Laws Tongue) is a more common name, a smaller Bird of Paradise and Passion flowers.



From here we moved on to the annual bedding plants which are used throughout HRM for the beautiful hanging baskets, bed displays and carpet beds which we all admire so much. Carpet beds are the plantings we see where the entire bed is made up of solid colours by using different coloured plants planted in very close proximity to each other. There are any number of plants which can be used to give the different colours and textures needed for the display. The previously mentioned Seamore Turtle and the bed display by the A. Murray Mackay Halifax exit ramp are both examples of carpet beds at their best as are the plantings at Leighton Dillman Park in Dartmouth.

This brought us along to the production/work area of the greenhouse, where cuttings are made and planted in flats of 128 starter cells. The planting medium is a sterile soilless mix of a combination of Sphagnum Moss and perlite, which requires the cuttings be kept fertilized after

planting. Denise, was making annual cuttings and soaking her cuttings in the diluted Safer's Soap solution prior to planting in the starter cells. Once a flat is fully planted it goes into a covered, humidity and temperature, controlled location, much like the cold frame most of us are familiar with. They had 6,000 bedding plants started when we were there but that will increase by up to 50,000, depending on the year's needs. These starts are watered and fertilized by misting with a hand, held watering wand.



Denise and Jill told us they use 3 strengths of Rooting Compound, # 1 for softwood and easy-to-start plants; # 2 for semi-hard cuttings, ideal for perennials and woody plants; and # 3 for more difficult plants such as hardwood cuttings. They cautioned # 2 would be too strong for softer tissue plants such as annuals. Jill said they propagate from, seeds, plant plugs and cuttings. These are sourced from preferred seed firms, and even the Harriet R. Irving plant sale at Acadia University for native plants. Jill demonstrated a time and labour-saving device that will plant 1 seed in each of the 128 starter cells at one time, obviously a great advantage when you are doing thousands of starter plantings per year.

When asked about native plants we were told they are getting into them more all the time, with Service Berry, Cardinal Flower and several others currently coming along. They showed us a hanging watering system where a porous probe is connected to an overhead watering system which, when inserted into a planted container, will supply the optimum amount of fertilizer and water on a programmed schedule.

This entire tour took about 1.5 hours, a Q and A session included. From talking to those on the tour, I'm told everyone came away with some valued information plus a much larger

appreciation of the countless plantings we have within HRM. It was indeed our very good fortune to be able to see this facility, especially when outside winter was in full force and we were in where it was so comfy and relaxed. Our sincerest appreciation to Chris, Jill, Denise and Jane Rostek, who was our initial contact and who initially set up the tour. This was a perfect location for such a cold and blustery mid, February tour.

