

## **THE BEST OF THE UNITED KINGDOM**

### **“A Review of the Baldwin Trip to GLEE and UK Garden Centers”**

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So, here I am sitting on the Piccadilly Line headed for London's Heathrow airport having just finished Ian Baldwin's 2008 England Garden Center Tour and GLEE Conference. It is with no doubt that I can say this trip was beyond my wildest dreams.

In a difficult economy, I had a tough time justifying the investment. There is no doubt that the trip was well worth it. In just a few short words, I'll share with you some observations from the worlds best garden centers and the GLEE show.

Let me begin by saying that the United Kingdom sets an example to the world when it comes to garden centers. The English just take their gardening more seriously than anyone else on the planet. They are just passionate about their open space. As Ian Baldwin would say, “in a country of fifty two million in an area the size of Michigan, open space and outdoor beauty is paramount.” The English also face changeable and often lousy weather. This makes the limited good weather and allure of “outdoor living” even more important to them.

When it comes to the Garden Centers we visited there are three that stand out as the best I've ever seen. While each of these had their own beauty, there are certainly consistent themes that make them winners. Theme such as cleanliness, clear signage and flawless retailing were discovered at every stop.

One of the most impressive Garden Centers we visited was Webb's of Wychbold. Webb's was fantastic! Having undergone a major recent renovation, it was awarded the Top Garden Center in the United Kingdom for both 2007 and 2008. I was particularly impressed by their commitment to the sale of merchandise geared toward wildlife. The birding and wildlife department at Webbs was remarkable. In fact, they have a partnership with the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) that amounts to great signage, education, outreach and unique product. I was also impressed by the large specimen trees mixed with their green offering. Their bathrooms were also very well done. They were spacious and elegant. I was so impressed by the wide aisles, great displays and clean store that I even gave the owner, Richard Webb, a giant bear hug.

Another garden center that knocked my socks off was Bents Garden & Home in Warrington. In 2005, they invested in a giant 50,000 square foot “open sky” ceiling behind the store. This allows them all-season “retailing” and makes for an impression similar to the National Arboretum in Washington D.C. Bents does a great job cross-merchandising product throughout the store. This was particularly apparent when it came to their collection of Scheurich Pottery paired in ways you'll only see at trade shows. Scheurich advises equal parts of plants, pottery and finished products in display and Bents “gets it,” as Keith Turbett of Scheurich would say. Their grounds were paved, well marked and clean.

The final garden center of distinction was Trentham Garden Center in Trentham. Trentham was the most impressive garden Center I've ever seen. The sheer size of the single garden center

(steel) structure was amazing. It was easily the size of a typical Wal Mart in the United States. The designers of the center were very careful to break up the structure into rooms and allow for excellent flow through a myriad of departments. The most impressive displays were in their pottery department where product was creatively arranged by style. I was also drawn to their wide array of pre-planted pottery. While some were brought in pre-made, many were built right on the sales floor. One of our team members, Rex Yarwood of Rogers Gardens, pointed out how this engaged the customers in the process involved; adding to the experience offered. I completely believe what Rex had to say and one of the first things I did when I returned was add a "potting station" to my garden center.

Following the visits to the many garden centers, we arrived at GLEE. We were greeted with international flair including special signage and a reception featuring GLEE staff and representatives ready to help export to the United States.

To put it simply, GLEE was mind boggling. The first thing that impressed me was the sheer size of the show. There is no doubt that it is the largest garden and outdoor living show in the world. I was also impressed by the unique merchandise available. I paid particular attention to solar powered, green and environmentally friendly products I had not yet seen in the United States. The unique gift items also got my attention.

The GLEE show allowed me to establish relationships with a number of overseas vendors for pottery, stone and sculpture pieces. The key difference from other trade shows I have attended was the fact that the displays were truly built to show how to sell product. There were a number of displays set up exactly as they would be assembled at my garden center. The seminars were impressive as well.

I can confidently say that my trip to the UK's best garden centers and GLEE will forever change retailing at my store. Cross-merchandising and the proper display of product will replace "maintenance" of dead and dying product and displays. I've grown confident to use bold colors that inspire and show the entire picture rather than just sell plants or pottery. I've clearly observed that signage and creative displays are essential to "silent sales" that replace large teams of staff members.

The entire experience would not have been possible without the leadership of Ian and Lisa Baldwin. Ian is a renaissance man for our industry and his tour clearly had an impact on us all. The many ideas, great advice and new found friends were awesome.

Our industry is unique. We are family oriented and committed to one another's success in a special way. My trip to visit the United Kingdom confirmed this point. In my opinion, a trip like this one is a must for anyone looking to step up their operation.