

ISU-Congress 2008 in Sweden

What does one expect from an ISU congress in Sweden?

As a great friend of Scandinavia, what I know is:

A friendly and cheerful people, clear lakes, deep forests, roads free of traffic jams, vast amounts of landscape – and, with a little bit of luck, elks and marmots.

But botanically and horticultural?

Lichen, moss and fungi, some Aruncus, nurseries with a limited assortment of perennials with a hardiness zone of 1 to 5 – this was my expectation, and I had to update it thoroughly.

Our hosts showed us fantastic parks and gardens, with traditional as well as innovative sites and ideas. Our Swedish colleagues run very well organized and well-kept businesses with up-to-date and unusual assortments in best qualities. In most places, perennials are present in the public green, and the botanical garden of Gothenburg is said to be one of the most beautiful in the world. And I confirm this.

We lived in Kungläv, in the very nice Hotel Fars Hatt. Kungläv is a small town about 17 kilometres from Gothenburg and has a lovely old city. I don't think that anyone will believe me that I saw two cow elks on a little walk above the city on the last day!

With its 80 members, the group had a manageable size for a congress. Members came from 14 countries, from Europe and overseas. Peter Gaunitz's deafening bell and his strong voice guided the group very well and supplied many informative and funny anecdotes about Sweden and its people.

From the very first day, we could witness how deliberately perennials are used in the public green. Vardens Park, in Gothenburg's Backa quarter, is an area of app. 8000 sqm. in a relatively dull neighbourhood, full of unimpressive, grey blocks of flats. But they are not perceived as such, because entrances and footpaths are lined with colourful belts of perennials; the flowerbeds are high in symbolism. No garbage is lying around and the atmosphere is homey and pleasant. One can imagine how the residents relate to this surrounding, they can feel good and secure.

Mona Holmberg and Ulf Strindberg, two of the ISU members who were accompanying us, have participated in the planning of this area. More than 600 species and varieties have been used. Big, neat panels inform about the plants, along with border plans and take-away information sheets, protected from the rain by plastic boxes. A very nice idea.

Our lunch at Gunnebo, an 18th-century manor, was delicious; chicken, salad and vegetables are grown locally. The architecture is as impressive as the big vegetable and herb garden. An electrical wire prevents snails from entering into the patch – a very interesting alternative. A part of the international exhibition "Gardens in Gothenburg 2008" was situated on these premises.

In the afternoon, we were flooded in a double sense.

Under pouring rain, we visited the Nordström nursery. I felt very sorry for them, I'm sure they spent hours on cleaning and weeding for our visit, and then it was raining.

But between several showers we could walk, with respect and a bit of envy, through the clean and great stocks, especially Geranium Jolly Bee, yellow and orange Echinacea, Heuchera varieties – all the novelties you need.

The weather cleared in the evening, right in time for the ISU-Olympics. To thoroughly mix through the 14-nation-group, Rickard and Marie had invented games and drew by lot the groups. After Tomahawk-Tossing, Soap-Slipping and Marble-Collecting with the toes, we all

sat down to eat. With red wine and aquavit (a fatal combination, by the way), the communication was working very well.

We spent the next day in one of the most beautiful parks of Sweden, the Trädgårdsföreningen, that was established for the public as early as 1842. The magnificent Victorian greenhouse and old trees are witnesses of this time. But the park is alive – restaurants, cafes, theatre plays and concerts are attracting people of all ages.

Along with the permanent theme gardens and the rose garden with about 4000 roses from 1900 varieties, another part of “Gardens in Gothenburg 2008” was temporarily situated there, planned by renowned garden designers from all over Europe.

Most themes and their implementations were highly topical. Piet Oudolf worked here and the “Prairie” was omnipresent. But there were also gardens called “From the Ashes” or “Passage”, very minimalist creations and plant constructions that called for a second thought about their actual meaning, and sparked discussions, similar to modern paintings.

In 2003, it was nominated most beautiful garden of Sweden, in the “Most Beautiful Garden” competition in 2006 it finished third: the botanical garden of Gothenburg.

40 ha of the 175 sqm. of the park are intensively worked on. Its botanical range is estimated about 16,000 species and varieties. Especially worth seeing is the rock garden, as well as the Rhododendron Valley and the Japanese Clearing – with all three, one thinks to be transferred to the natural habitat.

The ISU-award candidates are planted in the botanical garden and are being monitored during 2 years; our congress participants could evaluate them during our visit.

People taking part in the trial delegates assembly had the possibility to feel the special atmosphere of the venerable library in the 100-years-old building. Timber floor boards, panelling, dark solid oak tables and chairs; old, heavy, leather-bound tomes up to the ceiling, concentrated knowledge. – “Sitting here now, with a book, a good red wine and a cigar – that would be it!”, citing the new ISU president Jakob Hokema.

Additionally, the botanical garden Gothenburg hosts the probably biggest collection worldwide of Dionysia, those globular marvels that carry thousands of little flowers. There are also collections of Drosera, orchids and Begonia; in the vast greenhouses, with all their fantastic tropical plants, cactuses and the special Alpines, my brain was touching the borders of its absorbing capacity.

After this truckload of impressions, we could relax on a boat at night. A very funny boat...

Before departure, the captain was “taken hostage” for a stag party; the crew sang for us later on. Nomen est omen – the boat is called “Troubadouren”.

We had a great seafood buffet, and only fear of food poisoning let me finish the meal and made me go on deck.

We were passing through the breathtaking archipelago coast. Who might live in these small cottages on those small rocky islands? Does the postman come? How do you get to work, where do you buy your food? It is another world, and we couldn't stop looking at it.

As a highlight, we were passed through a lock into the “Älv”, which is absolutely unusual, since salty water is entering this sweet water river. But we are the ISU, that opens some doors! The ship went up the river, directly to the hotel. Since there is no pier, the crew used pallets and beer crates to build one, and we scrambled, more or less easily, ashore.

“Troubadouren” redescended the river, with loud honking.

Three other nurseries were on the program. First, Jonas Bengtson, one of the organizers of this congress. The ancient farm, family-owned since the 16th century, could be the home of Michel of Lönneberga.

Jonas bought the farm of his parents in 1990, to found his small, very exceptional nursery. He is a plant collector. In the 1250 sqm. Rovero Rollair house, one of his best ideas as he says, stand very good and clean stocks, amongst others 13 varieties of *Anemone nemorosa*, 16 different *Arisaema*, 15 varieties of *Anemone hupehensis* and many of the new *Echinacea* and *Heuchera* varieties.

A curious traveller with good contacts, he looks for plants in the Sikkim region in the Himalayas, and Patagonia (Argentina). Jonas' biggest customer is the plant shop of the botanical garden in Gothenburg.

We drive a little bit across the "pampas" to reach the next very unusual nursery: Peter Korn's, situated on a huge plot of typical Swedish nature – giant rocks, spruces, and small brooks. On the first ISU winter seminary in Grünberg, Peter Korn gave a lecture about cultivation on sand that blew everybody's mind, first because it was so funny, second because it was so astonishing.

He simulates on this land all kinds of natural situations. While moving the biggest rocks seemingly without any difficulty, the rest is very easy for him – a load of sand, and in go the plants. What grows, grows. And if not, well, it doesn't deserve it...

He grows most of his plants from seeds that are sent by his brother, a botanist who bikes all corners of the earth.

So this oversized show garden is designed more as a botanic garden than for aesthetic purposes.

A small shop adds to the public area.

In the Våro Trädgård nursery of Monica and Ronny Börjesson, everything became more familiar. They grow about 600,000 perennials of 750 species and varieties and sell them mostly to garden centres.

About 10 years ago, said Monica, they stopped using pesticides, using beneficial organisms and biological strengthening instead.

Shipping building, potting machine, label store-room, shelves full of plants ready for shipment – all was very familiar. Despite the hospitalization of her husband, Monica had everything under her control, we had a very interesting tour of the nursery, and an appetising buffet in a decorated greenhouse.

On the evening of the last day, our ISU group was hijacked on the Marstrand island. Heavily armed men forced us, in lockstep and with drums, up the hill to the Carlstens fortress, the gates closing as soon as we entered the fortress, and we were locked in.

But then, our luck changed, and we were received like guests of honour, with cannon shots. Since then, I am deaf on my left ear.

The most delicate ladies were chosen to shoot, with muzzle loaders full of real gunpowder, out of the arrow slits, an experience that Catherine from France and Sylvia from Sweden won't forget before long. I am sure that both are now deaf on their right ear.

During the Viking dinner that followed, we forgot all table manners. We used our finger to eat, because we were afraid of the huge forks and swords that were lying around, and we drank our wine out of drinking-horns. To eat our dessert, we simply turned our wooden plates around, and to raise our glasses we stepped on the benches and tables. What would our mothers have said!?

At midnight, the gates were opened again for us and alas, we could leave the fortress safe and sound – even if "Ole Denmark" was gloating to our host that they had served a Dane. Thank God, the Swedish are much more peaceful nowadays. Dear Ole, this could have cost us our necks...

As always, the conclusion of the ISU congress is:
Its not only informative, but it lets us see beyond our noses, makes possible an easy encounter
and exchange with professionals of 14 nations, and it is loads of fun on top of it.
The next congress takes place in Germany – come, everybody!

Doris Pöppel
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