

IFTA visits neighbors to the North

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July 21- 23, 2025, one hundred [International Fruit Tree Association](#) members visited neighboring orchards to the north, in Ontario, Canada during their annual Summer Study Tour. Bed and breakfast was at the Doubletree in London, Ontario from where we headed west on Day 1 to the Leamington area on the northern shore of Lake Erie, and then on Day 2 east to the Niagara Frontier on the south shore of of Lake Ontario. Followed by a quick morning trip on Day 3 to an orchard and garden center closer to London. What follows are some pics and brief highlights from the Study Tour.

Day 1, Westward Ho!

[Thompson's Orchards](#) hosted by Don Thompson. 110 acres of apples, peaches and pears. Don says "My tree planting awakening came during an IFTA Tour in Nova Scotia, where I met Terence

Robinson for the first time and was exposed to new ideas about high density planting." Guess what? Current row spacing has stabilized at 2 feet by 10 feet.

AAFC (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada) [Harrow Research & Development Center](#). Mostly a bus tour of their many projects including their clonal gene bank consisting of about 800 apple and 200 pear accessions amongst many other Canadian fruit crops (think berries). Security was tight for obvious reasons I guess, we had to present our passports prior to the tour and did not get off the bus out in their plantings. [The Fruit Wagon!](#) hosted by Leslie Huffman and Doug "Fruit Wagon" Balsillie, both long-time IFTA participants. Canada's "Most Southerly Orchard" in Harrow. Many looked forward to this stop where we saw the real Fruit Wagon, and Doug and Leslie toured their fresh-market apple and pear orchards intermingled with cider apples for their daughter-operated fledgling Carolina Cider Co.



Figure 1. Surround(ed) apples (Honeycrisp?) at Thompson's Orchards. Surround application(s) seemed to be a common practice in Ontario.



Figure 2. Bus shot of apple accessions at AFC Harrow Research & Development Center. Note hail/sunburn net. Why?



Figure 3. The actual famous Fruit Wagon

Day 2, Isn't the Niagara Frontier famous for wine?

Vineland Research & Innovation Center <<https://www.vinelandresearch.com/>>. Formerly solely a Agriculture-Canada/University of Guelph government research station, now a rather re-born public-private partnership whose mission is "Improving the economic viability, sustainability and competitiveness of horticulture in Canada." Impressive collaboration with several "education" stops including soil health and apple variety breeding and evaluation. They are pretty serious about the latter, that is bringing the next great (best thing) new apple variety to Canada (and beyond) growers.



Figure 4. Giving a tour of The Fruit Wagon orchard, Leslie and Doug as always are entertaining. Especially Doug. Note the "crop and flop."



Figure 6. One of the well-orchestrated education stops at Vineland, this one hands-on soil health.



Figure 5. Red Heart apple trees at The Fruit Wagon. Used exclusively for making cider.



Figure 7. One of the apple test variety plantings at Vineland.

[Thwaites Farms](#)

wholly a pear stop. (Ho-hum.) But 500 acres growing asparagus, peaches, nectarines, seedless grapes, and oh those pears. Climate-wise the Niagara Frontier is nearly perfect for growing all kinds of fruits.

And, when in the Niagara Frontier, must check out a winery. In this case

[Sue Ann Staff](#)

[Winery](#), Sue-Ann being a fifth-generation grape grower and award-winning Canadian winemaker. I have to say it was not the typical majestic winery on the hill experience, more “homey,” but it was well executed and the wines were very good.

Too busy drinking wine to take pics? Likely.

(Half) Day 3, not too far from London

Versteegh Farm/Orchards, hosted by Michael Versteegh. Not much to say here other than how could it be done any better? One interesting note, M.9 is the rootstock of choice, trees largely looked uniform and healthy. When asked about RATD (Rapid Apple-Tree Decline), Michaels comment was “oh yes, we see some of that, it’s just winter injury.” Humph. Should also mention some tech was highlighted here, including the [H.S.S. AgBot sprayer](#) and crop load visioning by home-grown [Vivid Machines](#).

[Heeman’s Greenhouse](#). Strawberries and Cider. Top notch garden center where customer service and welcoming via “Daymakers” was top priority.



Figure 8. Sensory/taste evaluation of new/test apple varieties an important part of new apple variety testing at Vineland. Impressive research.



Figure 9. Nice looking pear crop at Thwaites. Surround(ed) of course!



Figure 10. Nice Honeycrisp/M.9 block at Versteegh.

Amazing signage and plants. Wish I lived closer.



Figure 11. Will Heeman shows us their strawberries, still being harvested and sold at their “drive-up” strawberry sales trailer.

Be sure to visit the [IFTA Facebook page](#) for more pictures and info. And as always, thanks very much to our Canadian hosts. It was a good and informative time had by all.

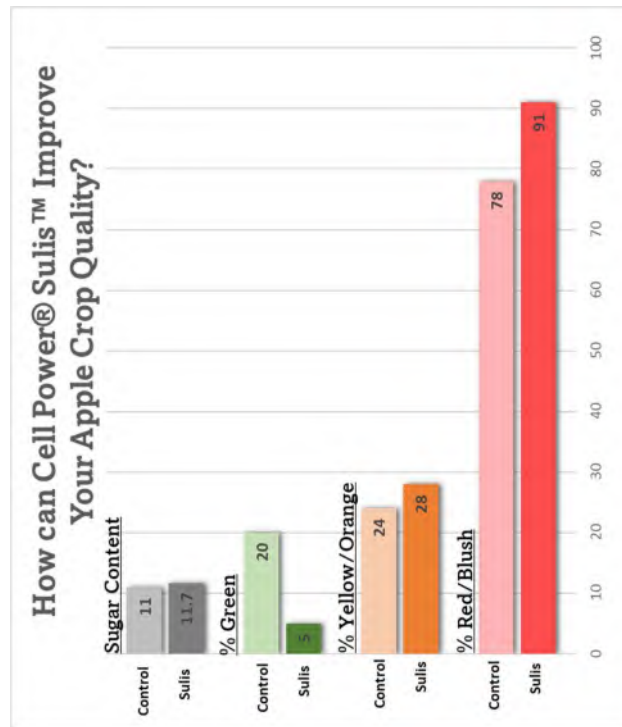
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