The theme was “Global Competitiveness” and for its attendees it was a great time to benchmark themselves in an international context to ensure that their businesses and their industry remain relevant and sustainable in the years to come. The event was the 9th International Protea Working Group Symposium being held in conjunction with the 13th International Protea Association Conference held August 29 – September 6, 2008 in South Africa. International delegates from 18 countries from 6 continents made the trip to the Cape Floral Kingdom, the home of the majority of the southern African members of the Proteaceae family, to attend this bi-annual conference.

This great adventure began with a four day pre-conference tour of eight Protea Farms scattered to the north and east of Cape Town. Each of the 90 pre-tour attendees had the chance to see and appreciate the country-side and fynbos as they traveled from farm to farm.

Fynbos literally means ‘fine bush’ and is a unique type of vegetation that accounts for more than 80 percent of the plant species in this Floral Kingdom. Over two-thirds of these plant species are not found growing naturally anywhere else in the world. Fynbos is represented by approximately 100 families. The three largest families are: the small-leaved ericas, the large-leaved proteas, and the grass-like restios. It was absolutely incredible to see beautiful, colorful protea and leucadendron growing wild along the roads and hillsides.
The Cape Floral Kingdom is the smallest of the six plant kingdoms in the world, and occupies a small four percent of South Africa’s land, yet it is one of the earth’s hot spots because of its exceptional biodiversity.

Needless to say, each of the protea farms visited were exquisite, despite the fact the weather was some of the coldest South Africa had experience in over five years. The thought of snow on mountain-tops where protea grow wild seemed impossible before this venture. The eight farms visited were: Willowgreen, Berghoff and Arnelia near Piketberg, north of Capetown, and Honingklip, Floralnd, Molteno, Oak Valley and Vredelust to the south-east of Cape Town. It was thrilling to see first-hand how each farm operates, how they propagate, grow and market protea (the knowledge they shared was invaluable) and their hospitality warm and welcoming.
As the pre-tour came to a conclusion, the buses headed for the Protea Hotel in the town of Stellenbosch, the IPA Conference site, where the attendance grew to over 150. The second oldest town in South Africa, Stellenbosch, holds the honor of being the most well-known town. It is the home of the country’s premier Afrikaans university, as well as the epicenter of the burgeoning Cape wine industry.

The opening keynote address was presented by Dr. Mohammad Karaan, Stellenbosch University’s Agricultural Economist, who spoke about working as a team in today’s global economy. The morning continued with nine sessions covering topics like: Establishing Leucadendron Safari Sunset as a Commercial Floriculture Crop, Effects of Salinity on Seedling Emergence of Leucospermum, and The Impact of Climate Change, Biosecurity Concerns and Global Plant Trade on Pests and Diseases in the Protea Industry.

As the afternoon temperature warmed to more “typical” South African level, the attendees headed to Helshoogte for a visit to Morgenster’s two protea farms. At the first farm, the group viewed staff as they cleaned and graded the Protea Kings, Protea Venus, Pincushion Succession and Leucadendron Gold Strike, followed by a quick stroll into the leucadendron field. Large fields of beautiful Protea King and Sylvia were explored at the final stop.
The evening event was a trip to Moyo in the Spier Estate for an African Experience and Dinner. It was held under a star-filled African sky inside a very large tent - with heaters of course. Food stations offering a wide selection of African cuisine were scattered throughout the tent and the entertainment enhanced the theme and set the mood.

Day two of the conference included a full day of lectures and poster presentations. Topics included: Systems for Production of Out-of-Season Protea Cut-Flowers, Time of Pruning affects the Yield, Flowering Time and Quality of Protea Pink Ice, Creating Next Generation Flowers in the Family Proteaceae, and Marketing Leucadendron Safari Sunset in the Dutch Auctions.

The conference continued on day three with more topics on Post Harvest Physiology and Technology. Presentations included: Standing Out from the Bunch – an Update on Winning Strategies for Post Harvest Care; and Vase Life Extension of Leucospermum Cut Flowers. In addition, Dr. Guy Midgley, from the National Botanical Institute of S. Africa, discussed Protea of the Fynbos Biome in the context of shifting climate regimes. Dr. Midgley received a Noble Piece Prize for his research on Global Warming.

Pictured above: Conference Photograph on the Hotel Terrence overlooking the Stellenbosch Mountains, A view from one of the guestrooms at the Protea Hotel—nestled in the middle of a vineyard.
A trip to Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden was the afternoon adventure. This botanical garden was established in 1913 to promote and conserve the flora of southern Africa and was the first indigenous garden in the world. Kirstenbosch covers 528 hectares (1,320 acres) and includes 36 hectares (89 acres) under cultivation on the slopes of the mountain to the southeast of the Table Mountain range. Over 4,500 plant species are in cultivation and many are rare or endangered.

Currently, on display within the garden is replica of Kirstenbosch’s Chelsea Flower Show Display. In 2008 this exhibit in England won a gold medal for the most creative display and the President’s Cup. The design entitled The Heat is On has established South Africa "as a front runner in horticulture". It featured an aloe dichotoma (also known as a quiver tree), which is being studied and monitored as an indicator of climate change. These dead and dying quiver trees are displayed alongside live proteaceae to illustrate how warmer temperatures have forced the species to migrate southwards. Note, Kirstenbosch has won 29 gold medals at this flower show in its 33 appearances.
Grower’s Day, the final day of the IPA program, focused on Global Competitiveness and Marketing. Speakers covered topics from: Global Development of Proteaceae and International Marketing; a Summary of Global Production Trends; International Marketing Perspectives: New Market and Current Market Trends; as well as Challenges of New Cultivar Development in South Africa. Attendees from various countries spoke about the current status of the Protea industry in within their countries.

The final evening concluded with a Gala Dinner and a banquet room full of wonderful décor and centerpieces filled with some of South Africa’s finest treasures – Proteaceae.