

**NATIONAL PROFICIENCY TEST COUNCIL (N.P.T.C.)
SETTING — HOW PROFICIENT?**

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N.P.T.C. training during the present time must be seriously considered by all aspiring nurserymen, large or small. In my opinion, there must be a continuing awareness of the need for efficiency and expertise in our industry. The whole concept of training must be put into perspective. We must identify the areas we need to cover, and I suggest there are many.

To this end the N.P.T.C. has evolved a whole series of tests as listed in their schedule of activities booklet, which enable people of all ages to become proficient in the crafts of their choosing. To become a craftsman in the nursery stock section a candidate must pass in at least five activities, including plant identification and the propagation of plants in either the glasshouse or the frame/case or field. On passing the five tests the candidate will be entitled to a Certificate of Craftsmanship in addition to an increase in wages. The aim of the N.P.T.C. is to ensure that the same standards of craftsmanship are maintained throughout the country. This is achieved by setting up a panel of standard setters, which meet regularly with the examiners.

I can well remember the attitude of some nurserymen before the days of the N.P.T.C. It was very inward looking in that they would only pass on their considerable knowledge to a favoured few. The best instance I can recall was when, as an enquiring adolescent, I plucked up courage to ask a question at an A.D.A.S. meeting on the introduction of mist propagation in hardy nursery stock. I was firmly, but politely, told by a very eminent propagation expert to whom the question was addressed, that he was unable to give any details as his employer regarded his work as a trade secret! Fortunately a few years later this attitude was changed and a much more progressive outlook on training at all levels became the norm in most establishments. The system seems to be working quite well, at least in Hampshire where we have the largest input of candidates for tests. However, I do feel that there is room for some improvement. A more wholehearted approach to the subject is very necessary as I think that some people tend only to pay lip service to the matter of organized training. Where it is sometimes necessary to allow a student a reasonable length of time in order to achieve a task, owing to other more pressing pursuits on the nursery, the person involved sometimes has only

the minimum of training opportunity before coming forward to take a test. The examiner is the sole adjudicator and decides whether a person passes or fails a test based only upon the candidate's performance.

There is a need for more examiners and standard setters, and general support from within the industry.

The N.P.T.C. test is usually conducted either individually with the candidate on the employer's nursery, or in one central nursery or garden when several candidates can be tested. Here all the facilities to give a fair and unbiased test are available. Examiners do everything possible to put the candidate at ease.

To become a craftsman a candidate has to show the examiner that he can work with the minimum of supervision and be able to do the job skillfully at a commercially accepted speed. What exactly is an acceptable commercial speed? To give a standard speed for tasks is to say the least very difficult, as there are so many outside influences to contend with. For instance, how can the examiner evaluate bench grafting if the person involved has first to collect the stocks, gather the scions and transfer the grafts to the propagating house after grafting? Then arrange, water, and shade the grafts all in about 45 minutes. As only a few grafts are completed in the given time by the candidate the examiner must be given a certain amount of leeway in determining whether or not, in his opinion, the candidate under test conditions is performing to the best of his or her ability. Quite often when the candidate is left alone to graft a batch of plants a first rate job is achieved in a short space of time, but when being watched, the same candidate will be all at sea. However, a good examiner will soon be able to spot the people who have had the experience and who are able to produce good work.

I believe that experience is all important. It is no good giving a candidate a few hours work with a knife and expecting him to become as truly proficient as one who has been doing the job for years. This leaves us with the questions of how fast and how good should the candidate be to pass?

Speed does not necessarily mean efficiency. What does the industry want? Some people feel that a candidate is being asked too much when required to identify 25 out of 30 plants put before him. Not only must he know the genetic names but also the cultivar where applicable. The plants to be identified should be those grown on the candidate's holding and not obscure or rare types.

I understand that in the new proposals which may apply in 1985, it has been suggested that a 70% pass mark will apply,

thus reducing the number to 21 out of 30. I have my own thoughts on this! A candidate should, in my opinion, be able to make and insert about 50 cuttings for either a bed or box in 30 minutes. He or she should also be able to demonstrate a basic knowledge of hormones if used and the after care required. The actual number here must be a variable depending on the type of material used.

Another problem in assessment is rose budding, and fruit or ornamentals tree budding. Again, what is an acceptable speed? I put it to you that the first requirement is that the operation must be successful. What is the use of putting on 1,000 buds a day if half fail? Secondly, that the tying or covering is just as important as the carpentry of the budding itself. So the number that a craftsman should be able to achieve under reasonable conditions in about 30 minutes, I would suggest 25 to 30 buds. Obviously more experienced hands can work faster. The emphasis being placed on the word "experienced".

Finally I would like to give one other example. Field lifting by hand sounds a simple task, but to some candidates it becomes an onerous one! Again, the time allowed is usually about 30 minutes, with the person concerned being asked to lift 5 conifers of a given size and quality, and to root ball them. In addition the candidate must lift 10 bare-root trees to a select grade and height and stem circumference. They are then bundled and left covered with straw or another suitable material for protection in readiness for collection. The trees must also be labelled. This all seems quite simple but the operations are sometimes carried out very badly. The labelling and counting sometimes have to be seen to be believed!

How about the examiners? These are practical people with a certain amount of technical ability, who have been recommended as testers by the industry. The recommendations come from nurserymen, A.D.A.S. Advisers, skilled craftsmen, and N.F.U. workers unions. To do the job properly an examiner must be a fair-minded and thick-skinned character. It is impossible to keep everyone happy.

More examiners are needed. Examiner training is given in the following ways: There are three training days and these are not necessarily consecutive. Firstly, the trainee attends a test where he or she just "looks and learns". Secondly, the examiner attends a standard setting day where the standard of craft level to be attained is rigorously discussed and an acceptable level of proficiency is arrived at with a National Standard Setter. Thirdly, there are updating days held at least every two or three years. Standard Setters are normally recruited from

senior examiners or people recommended by the County Proficiency Test Committee. Their main duty is to set and maintain standards nationwide. They do this by involvement at examiner training days and monitoring tests in progress. They meet regularly in order to update and streamline the tests. They are sometimes elected to specialist panels in order to keep a weather eye on any new technology, such as the use of computers and micropropagation.

How can the industry help itself with regard to training? I hear a lot of comments about this or that being too soft an option, or something else being too hard to achieve, so I suggest the best way to get things done, or altered, is to become actively involved. As an examiner be heard by your County Committee. Finally, prepare the candidate properly before sending him or her for testing so that both you and the candidate will benefit.

What is a craftsman? The English Dictionary's definition is "A man with ability, skill and guile, and possessing a manual art". Is this the type of person we are hoping to pass or is this setting our sights too high? For most nurseries this definition, while being desirable, is not really obtainable for a number of reasons. The student is not left for long enough time in any one department to learn the skill thoroughly, because he is required elsewhere on the establishment for other seasonal work. I suggest, therefore, that perhaps the term "craftsman — Grade II", and later when more experience and skill have been acquired "Craftsman Grade I". Perhaps another title altogether may be appropriate.

I believe that to a large extent, with modern ideas and technology, fewer true craftsmen as we know them will be required. But more well-trained nursery staff who can competently deal with a given situation will always be wanted.

SHARE YOUR KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE — THE NURSERYMAN'S ROLE IN PASSING ON CRAFTS

DOUGLAS WEGUELIN

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Are we, as nurserymen, passing on all the skills we have personally, or are we leaving this to the colleges, day-release schemes, or Training Boards? The modern nurseryman or woman is so involved with computers, cash flow, profits, plants, pots and pans, and all that sells well, that he or she is