

THE IMPORTANCE OF GARDEN FESTIVALS TO THE NURSERY TRADE

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Garden festivals as a concept originated in Germany after World War II. They were conceived as a vehicle to attract attention to the urban renewal programme that was necessary as a consequence of war dereliction. It was considered that gardens and greenery were the best means to entice residents and investment to an area that had been devastated by the war. The colour and spectacle of a Garden Festival was seen as the ideal means to create a new image for an area.

The first garden festival was held in Dusseldorf in 1952. Since then, Germany has hosted many other garden festivals.

German festival sites are planned and planted over a 10 year period, so that all plants are very well established by the time the gates open to the public. After the Festival, these sites become new important high grade open spaces or parks for the host city.

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in 1992. A grade 2 approximates to a Continental event and this status has been granted to Columbus, Ohio. The connection between Seville, Spain, Christopher Columbus, and Columbus, Ohio is a powerful link that will generate enormous worldwide media coverage.

In this paper, I will set out the reasons why nursery people should participate in garden festivals based on our involvement in three festivals to date. We supplied grasses for a Grass Garden at the Liverpool Festival in 1984. In the Glasgow Garden Festival we created a grass garden. This attracted a lot of media coverage, was nominated the most innovative and imaginative garden in the Festival, was awarded a gold medal and was declared the overall winner of its particular section. In 1990 we designed and built the Irish garden at Expo '90 in Osaka, Japan. This garden was also awarded a gold medal and was adjudicated in two competitions as the best garden in the festival, beating entries from 81 other countries and 53 international organisations.

The publicity generated for Ireland as well as our own business is immeasurable. The cost of purchasing such publicity as advertisements would be the equivalent of \$20,000,000.

Why should nurseries be involved in a garden festival? Why should they take time out from their busy production schedules to familiarise themselves with the rules of entry, the construction and exhibition regulations, and the standards required by a Garden Festival? More particularly, why should a wholesale nursery with no contact with the public involve itself in something from which it can have no direct feedback or benefit. Is it not more natural and sensible that it leave such activities to the garden plant retailers and landscape contractors who can measure the direct dividends of their involvement in such a promotion?

Unfortunately, nurseries elsewhere have not confronted these questions. They have asked, but then arrived at the convenient conclusion that they should not get involved. By Irish standards we are a large nursery, by British standards we are a small nursery, and by US standards we are only a cabbage patch operation. However, with a small home market, we are committed to exporting, with over 70% of our produce sold through the top garden centres in Britain. We are committed to delivering a quality product and to innovative marketing. We are recognised as a source of new and original plant material.

To capitalise on this preception is what spurred us in October, 1985 to make what was for us, then, an outrageous commercial decision, that is to participate in the 1988 Glasgow Garden Festival. We had gathered together a fine collection of grasses and wanted to publicise their attractiveness and usage. There was little demand for these plants and we wanted to create a market for them. We took the decision to create a grass garden. Grasses have hovered

on the fringe of horticulture for a long time but have never really made an impact. They are continuously overshadowed by more flamboyant flowering plants.

Why promote a difficult group of plants? That was a challenge we felt worth confronting. It imposed on us the difficult design exercise of creating a garden of grasses or plants with grasslike foliage. Without other plants, it was a challenging design discipline to present grasses in an attractive way which would appeal to the general public and not just to the more aesthetic of landscape designers who already use them freely anyway.

The Garden was a resounding success. The Garden was not an advocacy of "grass only gardens" but was the most powerful means to draw attention to a group of plants that were not considered garden-worthy on their own. These plants, if intermixed with other plants in a more typical arrangement, would attract little attention and most certainly they would have neither created impact or attracted the attention they did.

The benefits of participating are still accruing to us and are doing so at an increasing pace. Grasses are now in demand, are very much a fashionable plant, and the Glasgow Garden is widely acknowledged as the inspiration for this increased demand.

It is my firm belief that plant producers must publicise the uses and benefits of their plants. In the automobile industry, the publicity is created by the major manufacturers, not by the dealers. The same principle must hold true in our industry and nurserymen must budget part of their resources to meet this need. From our experience of three Garden Festivals we know that such publicity generates demand for our plants.

This feedback to our nursery becomes our tractor to expanding production and selling more plants. Worldwide, there is no doubt that the sale of plants can be expanded enormously. The AmeriFlora '92 gives the American nursery industry a magnificent publicity vehicle onto which they should jump. We are all in the leisure business and the dollar that we fail to attract as a plant sale will, you can rest assured, be wrestled from us by the sleek professional operators in other areas of the leisure and tourist field.

Nurserymen should be warned, however, that a Garden Festival is not a Trade Show Booth, a mere presence to wave the flag is not sufficient. Garden festivals are about publicity and that goes to those who create gardens that are original, innovative, imaginative, that stimulate the public interest and capture their imagination. Too many garden entries at the British garden festivals have been historic, nostalgic and a reworking of old themes, plant groupings, associations and ideas. These efforts, whilst safe and competent did not generate much excitement, and worst of all, generated little publicity.

Gardens, at Garden Festivals are something like restaurants, you remember the very good, those that are different, or those where you had an awful experience. The reasonably good or the competent middle of the road design is instantly forgettable. In a garden festival, you must aim to design the best garden, the one that's most different or, failing that, the worse one. So far, we have managed to stay in the best category. That is good for our business sales, our production crew, and now we have more people employed in our propagation department, thanks to Garden Festivals.