

## **Trends in Horticulture in the United Kingdom**

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**This paper is based upon observations of the horticultural industry in the United Kingdom (UK) whilst on a teaching exchange from Australia during 1997/1998.**

### **1) EXTERNAL FACTORS INFLUENCING TRENDS**

Perhaps the most significant external factors influencing trends are developments within Europe. The UK is a member of the European Union (EU) and is involved in common policies towards, amongst other things, legislation and trade. There remains substantial competition between EU members, however, and in the case of nursery plants and products this is intense. Recently there has been a campaign to "Buy British", initiated by UK growers of advanced trees, where there is substantial competition between producers in Britain and those of Germany and Holland (Medhurst, 1998a).

European legislation covering environmental and consumer issues is slowly leading to changes within the nursery industry in the UK, not without some difficulties, however. At present the registration of agricultural chemicals is different between EU countries, leading to considerable grower frustration, although common legislation is on the horizon (Adlam, 1998). New standards are also being developed across Europe for the testing and assessment of growing media, which should lead to greater consistency of products (Rosenberg, 1998a). The BSE or Mad Cow Disease crisis in Britain has had a profound effect on the public perception of "safe" foods and has influenced changes in consumer attitudes in the acceptance of genetically modified products. Some supermarket chains are refusing to stock these items. Recently these same companies rejected stocking a new genetically modified carnation, developed by the Australian company Florigene (Rosenberg, 1998c).

### **2) INTERNAL FACTORS INFLUENCING TRENDS**

The economy in the UK is generally seen to be fairly robust at present with solid growth, comparatively low levels of unemployment, and a strong currency. Related to this are demographic changes in the UK. More people are now moving into urban and suburban/commuter localities, with government estimates of 4.4 million new homes needed by 2016, most in the already congested southern parts of the country (Ardle, 1998a).

The political landscape changed substantially with a new Labour government in 1997. Associated with this change has been the phrase (and image) of "Cool Britannia", used to promote growth and development in the arts, technology, and design. Many landscape companies are seeing a shift in their clients, with younger, wealthier customers being far more prevalent than in the past and seeking more innovative design solutions for domestic gardens (Scaresbrook, 1998).

Gardening seems more popular than ever in the UK; indeed one prominent broadcaster has stated that it is the new rock and roll! (James, 1999a). The extent of this popularity was demonstrated recently when the gardening writer Dr. David Hessayon, author of the "Garden Expert" series, was named the best-selling living author in the UK.

Apart from gardening as a "culture", it is the growth in the horticultural media, particularly television, which has a significant influence on trends. There are a number of regular television gardening programs each week catering for different interests, including design, construction, garden maintenance, and plant groups. At least one program, the BBC's *Ground Force*, has been credited with increasing garden centre custom and making people experiment more with their gardens (James, 1998c). There are also many horticultural magazines and journals, even a consumer magazine, *Gardening Which*, which, amongst other activities, trials and evaluates new plants and products. In a similar vein, the many large garden shows held throughout the UK are increasing in popularity and profile and have influence in the fashions and directions in horticulture.

### 3) TRENDS IN GARDEN DESIGN AND PLANT USE

Perhaps the major showcase for garden design and plants each year is the Chelsea Flower Show. In 1998 the main themes mirrored the main trends in design:

**Naturalistic Themes.** The uses of naturalistic elements through foliage, form, texture, contrast, water, and softer colours were strongly represented at Chelsea. This included gardens using popular foliage materials, but also newer "indigenous" plant materials, such as pollarded willows, woodland perennials, and flowering meadow species. Many gardens used water and aquatic plantings as elements or display themes.

This style of design is gaining more interest in the UK, partly as a result of trends elsewhere, such as Europe and the U.S.A. At one level this trend is best demonstrated by Penelope Hobhouse's recent book advocating greater use of naturalistic materials in a garden context (Hobhouse, 1997). The results of which can be seen in the nursery industry where increasing sales of plants such as grasses, sedges, hosta, and bamboo have been reported (Gress, 1998a; James, 1998b). At another level, in public landscapes, there is now demand for provenance forms of many British plants and greater use of flowering meadows and grasslands is slowly being appreciated, chiefly through studies undertaken at Sheffield University (Dunnett, 1999).

**Heritage Themes.** The UK has a long gardening history and it's hardly surprising that heritage themes are popular in design. One garden that attracted considerable attention was the "Imaginary Garden of Coco Chanel". Consisting of pleached hornbeams, an intricate parterre, carefully positioned sculpture, and simple colours (green and white), it provided a showcase of heritage materials in a new design context. A number of other gardens displayed similar, more formal design features such as symmetrical and terraced plantings, topiary, standards, and tightly clipped *Buxus* and *Taxus* hedges. This type of plant material has become more widely used, particularly in smaller domestic landscapes (Ardle, 1998a).

Historic gardens in general in the UK are riding a wave of popularity at present, especially those under the auspices of the National Trust (James, 1999c). There has also been considerable press regarding the "discovery" and redevelopment of historic gardens in the UK. Perhaps the best example is the "Lost Gardens of Heligan"; a



Cornish hillside garden rediscovered after almost 100 years of neglect and recently extensively renovated over a period of several years. Here, and at other redeveloped historic gardens such as West Dean Gardens in West Sussex, there has been huge public interest in the kitchen garden. This is another area in which trends have developed, particularly in the cultivation of vegetables where a surge in sales has been linked to the popularity of new cooking styles (James, 1998b).

**Outdoor Living Themes.** One of the main movements in garden design has been greater utilisation of outdoor living spaces — the patio is making a comeback!. Many gardens at Chelsea in 1998 displayed features associated with this trend; including hard surfacing, smaller, compact, and often unusual plants, different forms of garden sculpture, and containers. Some garden centres in the UK now regularly use completed displays of garden designs to increase sales. These designs can even be priced for supply, with one centre selling a Japanese garden kit, which includes an installation manual, all plants, and accessories and retails for £2000 (James, 1998b).

It seems that new plants are gaining most as changes in outdoor living continue. There is now great demand for more interesting forms of plants, particularly those suitable for smaller spaces and container growing and plants grown for “instant effect” (Ardle, 1998a). This includes fastigate, weeping, and standard trees, but also more compact forms of bedding plants, herbaceous perennials, and small flowering shrubs, such as new cultivars of dwarf *Hydrangea* (Ardle, 1998a; James, 1998a). Increases in sales have also been reported with scented plants, such as new sweet peas (James, 1998c; Rosenberg, 1998b), unusual groups of plants, such as Australasian and carnivorous plants (Ardle, 1999), exotic plants, such as palms and tree ferns (James, 1998a), and interior and tropical plants (Pawinska, 1998). The variety of potted colour materials is also increasing. Given that 40% to 60% of purchases from garden centres are said to be impulse-buying lines (Webb, 1998) this is hardly surprising, although the plants associated with promotional activities appear to be those doing best (Gress, 1998a). Consumers are also said to be demanding a greater range and type of flowering materials, even if this provides some difficulties to nurseries producing this material throughout the year (Medhurst, 1998b).

#### 4) TRENDS IN THE NURSERY INDUSTRY

Quality assurance in nurseries is a common issue between Australia and the UK. A program of nursery accreditation is currently being led by the Horticultural Trades Association and in the 18 months since its introduction, 43 major production nurseries have become fully accredited, while others are in the process of doing so (Rosenberg, 1999). Another recent trend is the formation of marketing cooperatives of production nurseries joining together to increase sales and product export, particularly to Europe. This has been aided by substantial government funding to form such cooperatives (Gress, 1998b).

New marketing approaches are also being used to improve retail sales. Market trials of new plants from growers to selected garden centres are now being used to gauge the likely consumer success of their product (James, 1999b). Better plant labelling and product presentation are also becoming more common in retailing (Ardle, 1998b); particularly as studies in English garden centres have shown that consumers are far more responsive to good labelling than any other presentation factor (James, 1999b).

One of the main area of trends within horticulture in the UK is through environmental issues, indeed this has been heralded as a major area of development for the future (Cox, 1998). One example is the growing demand for fibre-based containers, such as those made from recycled paper and peat. Whilst this is partly due to new EU requirements for waste management, it is also due to greater product availability, lower costs, and improved quality (Shaddick, 1998). As in Australia, new regulations aimed at minimising water pollution are now leading to more efficient irrigation systems and increased water recycling in nurseries (Briercliffe, 1998). Other areas within the industry which have been affected by this trend include integrated pest management and chemical alternatives, such as biological, organic, and biodynamic pest controls (Bennison, 1998); and the increased availability of eco-friendly nursery products in retail outlets, such as "green" product labelling schemes (Stebbing, 1999).

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