INDIAN SUPPLIERS

26. Chandra,
    Upper Cart Road,
    P.O. Kalimpong 734301,
    India. — Local

27. P. Kohli & Son,
    Park Road,
    Srinagar,
    Kashmir,
    India. — Local

E = Extensive Range
G = General List

DWARF ERICACEOUS PLANTS — A SELECTION WITH SALES POTENTIAL

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With my previous experience with ericaceous plants, plus five years in a general retail nursery prior to joining Bournemouth Parks, it might be interesting to evaluate the situation as an outsider to the trade.

During the five years of managership from 1972 to 1977 I became aware, as many others of you must have done, that to build up a new retail nursery with a very wide range of plants specializing in unusual and rare subjects, whilst in a very tight inflationary spiral, was a difficult task.

Now it seems we are off on another round of inflation which will again mean difficulty in budgeting and forecasting with any accuracy.

With this in mind, I think that nurseries, whether wholesale or retail, will have to examine profit margins more closely than before. What has occurred to me is to compare certain plants and their profitability with their relative ease of growing and their popularity with plants in similar groups.

Take, for example, *Rhododendron* 'Princess Anne' (*R. hanceanum* var *nanum* × *R. keiskii*). This plant was raised by Mr. W. Reuthe at Ightham, as a part of a dozen seedlings. We selected this clone, although all twelve seedlings were very good free-flowering plants, each having a fair representation of both parents. This plant was shown at the A.G.S. spring shows three years running and was well received by the public and quickly became in great demand. This is a plant which may be considered as a nurseryman's true friend because it roots very easily from semi-ripe to almost ripe wood cuttings, taken from mid-July through to January. The earlier the cuttings are taken,

of course, the better and quicker the rooting. With the use of either polythene or cold glass, a saleable plant 12″ × 9″ can easily be produced in 2½ years. At this age, if exposed to good light the summer before, one can expect 70 to 100% flower bud production, which we all know helps to sell any rhododendron.

Going back two or three years, a plant such as this would have retailed at around £3.50 to £4.00,

a) because it is a new introduction and
b) because it is yellow, compact and very hardy.

If one compares other plants grown on similar production lines, e.g. *R.* 'Blue Tit', *R.* 'Blue Diamond', *R.* 'Remo' and *R.* 'Scarlet Wonder', which at that time retailed for £2.25 to £2.50, it makes economic sense to grow the maximum number of the higher priced cultivar. To this end I never had the luxury of excess stock of *R.* 'Princess Anne' and, in fact, had to refuse several sales in order to build up a good supply of stock and show plants.

Showing plants at local and national level can often be promotionally useful, but many wholesalers and retailers, for one reason or another, completely ignore this side of the business. I feel, however, that it is most important to have one's key moneyspinners prominently displayed in the selling area and/or planted as stock or show plants wherever they have the greatest impact. Another important ploy used in a few nurseries is forcing and retarding plants of these "hot lines" in order to extend the flowering and, therefore, selling season; e.g., *R.* 'Princess Anne' flowers during the last week of April/first week in May and lasts at its best for approximately 3 weeks. It is quite simple to force the plant in gentle heat to flower 2 to 3 weeks earlier and to "hold" a batch in cool, shady conditions for one or two weeks after normal flowering. This effectively gives an extended season from the normal 3 weeks to 6 or even 8 weeks, therefore exposing the plant's sales potential to a wider range of customers.

Having used *R.* 'Princess Anne' as an example of how one type of plant can have an economic advantage over others, I would now like to briefly mention a few more.

R. indicum 'Balsaminaeflorum' (Syn.: *Azalea* 'Rosaeflora'). This plant again has tremendous sales potential, being fully double (not hose-in-hose like most so-called double azaleas). It is again easily propagated by cuttings as with other evergreen azaleas, and although it is more tender than the typical *R. obtusum* × *R. kaempferi* hybrids, under cold glass or polythene during its final pre-sales year, it is still very easy to grow.

It is a very compact and fairly slow growing cultivar, suited

to a slightly sheltered rockery or alpine garden and flowers from mid to the end of May. Because it is that bit different and somewhat exotic in appearance a 20% increase in the retail price can be justified to discerning customers.

R. 'Nakahari'. This is also a suitable alpine type azalea, in that it grows laterally and almost creeps across rocks and soil. It requires virtually identical treatment to *R.* 'Princess Anne' and *R. indicum* 'Balsaminaeflorum'. This plant is good from the economic standpoint, in that it does not flower until mid-June, even into July in some years, thus giving an extension to the rhododendron/azalea flowering period at a time when plant sales generally are declining from their May/early June peak. There is an orange form and red form. Again its novelty value and scarceness can justify up to 20% price increase over typical evergreen azaleas of the same age.

R. yakusimanum – Exbury form. Even with the introduction of many excellent hybrids of this superb species, I feel that from my own experience in the retail field, this plant has not yet been fully potentialized. Even ten years ago this plant was retailing at 4 gns. and I would think that a 3 year old plant will now sell at between £6 and £8.

During my time at Reuthes we had some difficulty in rooting this plant effectively from cuttings and obtaining a good growth response. Layering took 3½ to 4 years for complete establishment. Subsequent growth and flower potential never seemed to match plants grafted onto its near relative, *R. ponticum*. I must admit to having lost touch with results from "quick-dip" high hormone concentration techniques, although two close friends of mine, whom I consider very competent propagators, still insist on grafting onto *R. ponticum*. They both maintain that at the current market price and demand, propagation by saddle grafting is a very favorable economic proposition, as the rate of growth, percentage take, and early bud development yield a saleable plant within 2½ years.

This may also be the place to mention that in this field of the more interesting and much sought after type of plants, such as *R. yakusimanum*, *R.* 'Princess Anne', etc., the demand for the "instant specimen" was, and probably is, on the increase. I feel that growers of vision may well consider planting out batches in multiples of 100 plants or more to grow on for 5 to 10 years. In the field of dwarf rhododendrons their "ground rent" potential is very low, but their realization value, as I found, is extremely high. I remember the stock plants at Reuthes being sought after by various collectors at ridiculous prices, but the stock and show value of the plants alone, apart from their sentimental value, prohibited us from parting with them. Over 12

years ago I was offered in excess of £100 for a single plant on numerous occasions, so I know that semi-mature specimens are really worth considering.

Other ericaceous plants worth considering as relatively easy subjects to grow, with a public appeal and high income for low costs are:

Gautheria procumbens 'Macrocarpa'. This plant has a pronounced "petaloid calyx" and has been exploited well on the continent. It is very compact and free flowering, and produces berries well. It can be rooted from cuttings but one of the easiest methods of growing this subject is to plant it out into stock frames in equal parts peat, sharp sand and pine needles, 10 in apart. If left for 2 to 3 years, the plants will sucker and form a complete mat which can be lifted during the late winter or early spring and carefully divided into small plants, containerized and grown on in gentle heat at first, followed by a netting house or frame for the summer, to flower and berry that autumn for selling. I have found that when potting-on any of these subjects at the young bare root stage, very little or no fertilizer is required in the compost until establishment of the root ball. This has become more noticeable since the introduction of long term, slow release nitrogenous fertilizers which have been proved to release excessive amounts of nitrogen and ammonia during very sunny spells in early spring. This does seem to be more of a problem with ericaceous plants, particularly as the nitrogen is more readily released in high organic potting composts.

Once the root ball has become established, light liquid feeds may be inaugurated and some nitrogenous fertilizers introduced in small quantities in the subsequent potting-on. It has also been my experience that the first potting-on of these rooted cuttings should be into a smaller rather than larger size pot to improve the establishment of a good root ball.

× *Gaulnettya wisleyensis*. This bi-generic hybrid really does flower and berry in profusion and the berries remain on the plant for a long period of time. It roots easily from semi-ripe cuttings from August to November and grows quickly in cool, slightly shady houses and can be hardened off or grown in polythene tunnels during its second and third years. This plant, along with the new and better berried, hybrid pernettyas, is a notable moneyspinner. They are all being sold in greater numbers, particularly when large quantities of berries are present.

Andromeda polifolia. There are two or three worthwhile forms of this charming plant. The typical plant is a soft sugary pink, whilst the rarest form is *Andromeda polifolia* 'Compacta Alba'. A new hybrid, *Andromeda* × *nikko* is soft pink and of

very compact habit. All are very easy to root, grow and flower, and command a good retail price at 2 to 3 years.

Vaccinium glaucalbum. This superb foliage ground cover thrives on the poorest sandy soils and can be propagated either by stem cuttings or plunged in pots allowing suckers to root which are then removed and potted on. This plant is harmed by nitrogen fertilizers and scorches easily.

Other ericaceous subjects worth considering are:

Arctostaphylos uva-ursi, *Gaultheria miqueliana*, *G. cuneata*, *Cassiope* 'Muirhead', *Leucothoe fontanesiana* 'Rainbow', *L. rollisonii*. *Zenobia pulverulenta* (Syn.: *Z. speciosa*), *Vaccinium vitis-idaea* 'Nana' (*V. vitis-idaea* var *minus*? Bot. Ed.), *Phyllodoce aleutica*, and *R. camtschaticum* (which can easily be grown from seed).

Although not an ericaceous subject, *Cornus canadensis* provides a superb ground cover foil for all rhododendrons and associated plants and if planted amongst the stock beds and/or show areas, will prove itself to be another moneyspinner. It can be propagated by forced softwood cuttings or, as in the case of *Gaultheria procumbens*, be planted out to stock frames and allowed to go rampant prior to division and potting.

GROWTH REGULATORS AND DWARF PLANTS

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In the 1950s there were great hopes of an agricultural revolution through the use of hormones in plant production. Gibberellic acid (GA_3) was of particular interest because of many physiological and morphological changes it could cause in the plant. For example, it could increase shoot growth, initiate flower production, break winter dormancy, increase the rate of seed germination and promote cell division. But now, 30 years later, gibberellic acid is being used only in a few cases such as in the production of parthenocarpic fruits in pears and increasing fruit size in grapes. Not all possibilities of its use has been investigated, however. It is known that GA treatment of herbaceous plants such as dwarf peas, tomatoes and maize causes plants to take on the growth pattern of the "normal" plant. With this in mind, it is hoped to cut the production time of woody dwarf plants by applying GA. This should lead to a temporary suppression of the factors that cause dwarfness and