

The Role of Training and Education within the U.K. Nursery Stock Industry[®]

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INTRODUCTION

This paper is based on my career experiences within both education and nursery production. It raises issues about the different types of training and education available to the nursery stock industry and highlights why these are fundamental within the I.P.P.S. culture of “Seek and Share.”

Surprisingly, not all within the nursery trade think education is important. It is, however, fundamental in order that nurseries remain up to date and competitive within the ever-changing environment of the modern nursery stock industry. If education is carried out appropriately it can increase both quality and efficiency, motivate and develop staff, and keep businesses up to date with new ideas and technologies.

CHANGES IN COLLEGE EDUCATION

Traditionally, U.K. nurseries recruited their key staff from graduates of National Certificate and National Diploma programmes from a range of colleges, particularly those with commercial horticulture expertise such as Auchincruive in Ayr, Hadlow in Kent, Pershore in Worcestershire, and Writtle in Essex. However, the quantity and quality of such graduates have declined during the last two decades, and many growers now pass comments that “students are not as good as they used to be” and “colleges are not delivering the same standards of education as they did in the past.”

These comments are, in the main, correct, and comparing a graduate from a National Diploma course in 1990 to one from the same college in 2005 highlights the following facts. The graduate in 1990 would have had a pre-college year and a middle year in employment, plus two spells, each of 2 years, in full-time college. The full-time college year would have consisted of 40 weeks, with the students being in college for 5 days each week (i.e., 400 days over the 2 college years). A graduate from the same course in 2005, however, would have completed no pre-college or middle years. They would still have completed 2 years in full-time education, but a full-time college year in 2005 typically consists of just 30 teaching weeks, with the students being in classes for only 4 days per week (i.e., 240 days over the 2 year course). In effect, a National Diploma graduate in 2005 has had 2 years less industry experience and 160 days less education at college. This makes them less skilled, less knowledgeable, and, consequently, significantly less employable.

There are many reasons for this decline in standards, most of which are due to severe external pressures imposed onto colleges, but the important point is that nurseries must realise these changes have occurred. Then, instead of criticising colleges and their graduates, they must accept that the “product” of colleges has become a different one. Consequently, to ensure the quality of staff they require, nursery owners and managers must take much more of a positive role in the whole education process for themselves and their staff.

THE ROLE OF FORMAL IN-HOUSE TRAINING

Most nurseries carry out some in-house training, but these are in a range of forms and at various levels. Skilled staff can be trained to “teach,” and offices and/or corners of potting sheds can be converted into makeshift classrooms for workshops and taught sessions. The advantages to nurseries of such in-house training are:

- Training is done when and where the nurseries want it.
- Training can be tailored to the operations of the businesses; staff members are only taught what the nurseries want them to know.
- There is no additional college “padding” such as awarding-body paperwork, registers, and assignments and no qualification “tick boxing,” such as can happen with National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs).

There are examples within many nurseries of staff members who have been employed since leaving school and, over a period of years, have become highly skilled and knowledgeable within the areas of operation of the business. This in-house apprenticeship approach can be very effective, and staff members learn the processes, approaches, and methods specific to the place where they work. One of the disadvantages of this approach, however, is that staff can become “blinkered” into purely the operations of their employer and therefore unlikely to bring new ideas and innovations to the business.

GETTING THE BEST FROM FORMAL COLLEGE EDUCATION

There are a great many colleges and institutions, including botanic gardens, around the U.K. that offer horticultural training and qualifications. These range from 1-day competency training courses to post-graduate qualifications. Unfortunately, with the demise of specialist national centres for nursery training, colleges can now be very variable in the quality of their programmes, staffing, resources, and approach to education.

It has already been highlighted within this paper that education in colleges is not the same as it was 10 to 15 years ago (certainly not with the mainstream National Certificate, National Diploma, and Higher National Diploma programmes) and the traditional commercial horticulture colleges no longer offer the same specialist commercial nursery courses that they used to offer. Nevertheless, horticulture colleges still have an important part to play in training current and future nursery staff. However, the important thing nursery owners and managers must realise is that colleges have had to change how they deliver, and the “product” is now a different one. Accepting and understanding these changes is vital if growers are to take advantage of what colleges presently deliver.

Even with the changes over recent years, there are still a great many advantages to college-based training and education programmes, including:

- Funding may be available to send staff on the courses.
- Colleges provide knowledge and understanding of the principles of horticulture and plant science, which are seldom delivered within a nursery environment.
- Sending staff to college can add new knowledge and ideas to your business (Fig. 1).
- Courses are delivered by professional, trained, and experienced teachers (of course, this is only a benefit if these teachers ensure their knowledge remains up to date).

- At colleges students/trainees have access to facilities nurseries would not have (Fig. 2).
- College training provides networking opportunities for those attending courses. This gives a different perspective, broadens minds, and again may result in new ideas returning to the nursery.
- College courses provide recognised qualifications/certificates at many levels. This motivates staff and also can be used as part of your “quality” branding.
- Attending college can be seen as a “reward” by staff members who are sent on such programmes.

THE ROLE OF INFORMAL EDUCATION

There is a range of informal ways in which staff can learn outside formal training courses, but growers should consider whether they currently maximise all the following (and other) varied opportunities for education available to them and their employees.

Mentoring. The standard approach is that new staff members are paired up with a more long-serving employee (perhaps a supervisor, but not necessarily), who then acts as a mentor to the new person. It is an approach that can be very successful. Within this role, apart from helping the person settle in and integrate more quickly, it also helps to ensure that the practices and systems are introduced from the first day. The mentor provides the new member of staff with a definite point of contact for queries, and if done correctly, this approach can ensure new employees become effective much sooner.



Figure 1. Higher National Diploma students being instructed on how to bench graft *Aesculus × carnea* at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh. Such advanced techniques may not be practiced on many nurseries, but the propagation and plant science principles learned are transferable to other areas of nursery production.



Figure 2. Nurseries seldom have the range of facilities available at colleges, such as libraries and laboratories. Here a Higher National Diploma student at Edinburgh is using a microscope to view fern spores.

Books, Journals, and Training Publications. These are very important resources. Most nurseries, for example, subscribe to a selection of horticultural trade publications, which contain relevant features. But often it is just the owners/managers/supervisors who see these publications; more junior staff should be encouraged to read appropriate articles. This, again, is where a mentoring system can be of benefit, and if keen staff members are encouraged to read and learn, the benefits to the business can be huge. How many nurseries put copies of the journals into the staff mess room as well as in the offices?

Conferences, Trade Shows, Study Tours, and Seminars. These are hugely popular events (Figs. 3 and 4). As well as providing fun days out, they are also excellent networking opportunities, and much can be learned from them. Often, though, it is the same staff members who attend most or all the events on offer, and growers should look critically at who would actually benefit the most from specific programmes. Ideally a range of staff would go to different events over the year, and all should have clear aims for their attendance. It is very realistic, even with the most junior employees attending a trade show, to give staff a target for the



Figure 3. Visits to look at other nurseries can be an excellent learning experience. Here a group is being shown around Alba Trees, East Lothian, Scotland.



Figure 4. Growers viewing compost trials at a Waste and Resources Action Plan open day at the Welsh College of Horticulture.

day: for example to find one product that they feel would help them in their job or improve the nursery where they work. It can also then be a very useful exercise if staff members briefly present a summary of the day at a short team meeting soon afterwards. The important point is that the information from such events needs to be disseminated for maximum benefit.

AN INTEGRATED APPROACH TO TRAINING

In reality there are a great many ways in which nurseries and their staff gain new knowledge and skills. It must be remembered, though, that people learn in different ways. There is no singular "best" approach to education, and ideally a mix of approaches should be adopted. All methods have their merits, and it is recommended that growers question how they train themselves and their staff.

A good approach for large nurseries (or a cooperative of growers) may be to set up bespoke training courses that are delivered in partnership with a horticultural college. This brings together the benefits of colleges, but at the same time ensures that the training is tailored to the specific requirements of the business. It is, however, key that nursery managers/supervisors are involved in the training process from the planning through the actual delivery and assessment. Involving senior staff in this process will help to ensure that the course is tailored specifically to the business and its systems. This will also ensure that, after the training is complete, the skills taught on the course will be assimilated into the nursery ethos and the new ideas sustained.

Another key opportunity would be for nurseries to get involved in initiatives such as post-college training. This is seldom carried out, but when you remember that a National Diploma college graduate is now unlikely to have had any pre- or middle-year experience, the potential benefit of undertaking a 12-month training period after leaving college is clear to see. Taking students on into full-time posts with no practical experience straight from college is a gamble. A fixed 12-month period of post-college training would give nurseries time to properly assess the person, and even if they were not subsequently employed full-time, the skills and experience gained in that year would be invaluable to that person's future employment potential.

It is generally felt to be important that nursery owners/managers increase their involvement with colleges as much as possible. There are many cases of nurseries sending staff to colleges for courses such as day-release training programmes with little or no idea what their staff are actually being taught while they are there or, indeed, who is teaching it. At the end of such programmes trainees are simply expected to be educated and competent, but often they are not. A better approach would be for the supervisor/manager of the trainees to take time to discuss and agree to a joint training plan for each of their staff. Modern Apprenticeships and National Traineeships have tried to instigate such a joined-up approach to staff training, but often this becomes a paper exercise with no real benefits to either party. As part of this process, more nurseries could actually train their supervisors to become instructors/assessors, who would then be able to pass knowledge on to other staff. With such trained supervisors, every day would become an education for the more inexperienced staff.

Another way growers can become more involved and influence education is to become a member of either the board of governors or industrial liaison panel at their local horticultural college. Many colleges are keen to recruit proactive and enthusi-

astic representatives from the horticulture industry onto these panels, and growers are encouraged to make enquiries if they want to become more involved.

A collaborative approach between the industry and colleges produces quality, well-rounded, knowledgeable students, which translates into quality, well rounded, knowledgeable staff.

Preparing for a New Propagation Unit[®]

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INTRODUCTON

West End Nurseries is a wholesale specialist liner nursery producing a wide range of shrubs and climbers. In 2004, production was 2 million liners, 80% of which was from cuttings and seed, 15% micropropagated plants, and 5% bought-in cuttings or seedlings.

In Year 2000 we had an opportunity to change our business by investing in a new propagation facility. We knew we could not continue trading in the way we had done for previous years. The old propagation unit was highly inefficient, and the site did not lend itself to horticultural redevelopment. We purchased a neighbour's unused tomato nursery that had been redundant for more than 5 years. It included a 1970s 1,920 m² Venlo glasshouse with potential to build an additional 2,350 m² glasshouse. The purchase of the nursery was in order that West End Nurseries could become as self-sufficient in propagation as possible. It was becoming more difficult to buy in the plants that our customers wanted, and the cost of bought-in material was rising — we felt rising transport costs would only exacerbate this trend. With some competing nurseries abandoning their own propagation units, we felt investment was a good business opportunity enabling us to offer increased reliability to our customers.

PREPARING FOR A NEW PROPAGATION UNIT

Based on our experience, these are the key steps in drawing up the specifications for a new propagation unit.

Preparation.

- Plan effectively and allow sufficient time for all the processes.
- Collect data, including current benchmarks for time/labour costs and your own current costings for production in your existing unit (Table 1).
- Seek information from as wide a variety of sources as possible. It is important to keep an open mind at this stage and view as many other propagation units as necessary. Variation is useful, and we included visits to nurseries in other sectors such as bedding and pot plants. We found other nurseries generally very willing to allow us to visit.
- Visit trade exhibitions (we included those in the U.K. and continental Europe) to obtain information on the current state of the technology in areas such as environment control and handling.