

## Fresh Challenges at Kingfisher Nursery®

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One of the greatest attractions of plant production as a career is the satisfaction felt when cuttings root, grafts take, or seedlings germinate. Growing those on to become well shaped healthy plants is equally enjoyable. Problem solving is an essential skill of any good grower; the more difficult the subject, the more satisfying the success.

When my wife and I started Kingfisher Nursery in the 1970s the demand for container-grown nursery stock in the United Kingdom was increasing with more garden centres developing and the biggest challenge was expanding the nursery fast enough to satisfy the demand. Whilst there was a price premium for better quality plants there was a ready market for most shapes, sizes, and grades of plant. The range of selection offered in the trade was limited compared with today and often plant buyers preferred to stick with their old favourites. Established nurseries were still making the transition from field growing to container production so we as newcomers were on an equal footing with industry legends, some of whom were slow to recognise the future potential of container growing. Garden centre owners were often keen horticulturists, the plant area was larger than the shopping area and their customers were mostly enthusiasts, who gardened all year round.

Skilled labour was readily available in our area; we had a government sponsored advisory service to help us and a cupboard full of chemicals to fight off any pests or diseases.

There was gradual change over the next two decades, with inevitable variations in supply and demand, prices were tighter, but in general the U.K. nursery-stock trade continued to prosper and expand.

Production in most European countries was also expanding until about 5 years ago when economic factors, poor weather, and changing fashions which, among other things, brought about a slow down in demand and a glut of garden plants. The strong pound attracted imports from those other countries into the U.K. on a much larger scale than normal and price cutting was widespread.

Following years have been equally difficult and we are now seeing radical changes. Some nurseries are merging, some closing, and others growing less. Supermarkets are increasing their share of the garden market, garden centres are forming into chains, becoming larger but less plant orientated, and the gardening public is less knowledgeable and very fickle. They have many more leisure options than 30 years ago, more money but much more competition for it. New houses have much larger mortgages but smaller gardens. Purchases are nearly all impulse buys rather than planned purchases so plants often only sell when in flower. Autumn sales are declining with a large proportion of the annual sales concentrated in a few weeks in spring.

Annual wage increases have exceeded plant price increases, but it is increasingly difficult to attract local staff, particularly young people.

Legislation compliance has become a major concern for nursery managers with increasing need to provide evidence of compliance for all operations.

The range of crop-care chemicals registered for use is reducing every year, not always due to hazard level, but due to economics of registration for minor crops.

I know from my travels with IPPS that these problems are not unique to us, and I have been encouraged to note how growers in other countries have dealt with the challenges they have faced. Whether it is a clever business strategy to maximize their particular advantages, or just a clever gadget, it always inspires me to look longer and harder at my own problems when I get home. The following are some ideas that have worked for us.

**Marketing.** This is not always a popular topic with propagators but unless we can sell our plants the future is limited. Our approach at Kingfisher Nursery has been developed over many years. Although we started as a general nursery with a range of crops and both wholesale and retail customers we recognised this was not sustainable in the long term. We now specialise in growing heathers for a range of wholesale customers. We have attempted to make ourselves important to those customers by growing top quality plants, programmed to flower at the times of year when garden centres are busy, supported by informative point-of-sale material and same-week delivery service. We have developed bespoke labels to differentiate our heathers from other growers' heathers. These incorporate our innovative colour coding system to inform customers about soil pH requirements. Posters and coloured trays support this theme.

We have two new cultivars this year which are the first products from our own hybridisation programme. They have been selected for early flowering after extensive trials and again we hope they will differentiate us from other growers.

We are a founding member of the Linc-up marketing group of local growers who combine to send out monthly newsletters to plant buyers and work together to build our customer base. We have recently joined Quintus, another local group who have developed a system which offers plants from several specialist growers for wholesale customers to buy on-line from the Quintus website and receive one consolidated delivery, with one invoice. By buying little and often the garden centres can offer fresher plants with less waste. Hopefully joint deliveries will reduce our haulage costs.

Most of our customers are independent garden centres but we also supply landscapers who are looking for quality plants in larger sizes and a large supermarket chain who take a small range of plants, in large numbers, with different packaging. Our experience is that this mix of customers makes us less vulnerable to bad weather conditions.

**Plant Quality.** Plant quality has attracted a lot of our attention in recent years. Whilst heathers are relatively easy to root, the challenge is to produce strong, uniform plug plants that will grow on to make reliable first quality plants. We now take cuttings several months earlier, use larger cell sizes, and trim frequently. This adds cost at these early stages but we feel it is rewarded by reduced wastage and labour costs in the final pot. With short selling seasons it is valuable to have uniform plants for fast grading and despatch.

Potting is programmed in batches to meet target sales periods. Again it slows the potting team slightly but speeds up grading process considerably. Feedback from the sales team helps keep the production schedule adjusted to match changing trends.

**Labour Costs and Staff Availability.** Both labour costs and staff availability problems have led to increased mechanisation. Trimming and potting machines

reduce production costs and if correctly used can produce more uniform plants, which create savings later in the life of the crop. We have developed our own pot cleaning machine which is linked to a label print and apply system that allow us to process large orders quickly with reduced labour costs. This has helped reduce our labour peak in the spring season, our autumn peak has been reduced by moving propagation forward to the previous winter, hence creating a more balanced labour profile and offering comfortable productive work for our regular staff in an otherwise slack season.

Whilst there are less local people interested in horticultural work we have benefitted in recent years from an influx of Eastern European people into our area. Our latest recruit has been living in England for 4 years but originates from Bulgaria where he trained at agricultural college. A local staff agency helps us to supplement our regulars in busy periods, some returning year on year.

We try to keep non-productive time to a minimum. Investment in past years on concrete roadways, Efford capillary beds, and computer-controlled propagation facilities save on wage costs and free up skilled people for other tasks.

**Legislation Compliance.** Increased regulations and customer requirements have led us to join Globalgap, an accreditation scheme. This keeps us updated on legal requirements and creates good discipline throughout the nursery. Considerable work was involved initially to ensure the right systems were in place to enable good record keeping without hindering productivity.

We have developed method statements for every procedure. These incorporate health and safety risk assessments, materials and equipment needed, methods used, key points, and expected output rates. Layout plans and photos are often included. Again this took time to install but we now save time setting up tasks and are able to "hit the ground running" more often. Consistent methods ensure consistent quality.

**Reduced Chemical Availability.** One of the problems of running a specialist nursery is the risk of pest and disease build up. Heathers are particularly susceptible to fungal infections. We have relied on a programme of routine drenches and sprays in the past to prevent problems, but as some products have been withdrawn and the cost of those that remain has increased we have had to look for alternatives. Our approach now is to apply compost tea drenches throughout the life of the crop to suppress diseases, closely monitor the condition of the plants, and only resort to chemicals when absolutely necessary. After 4 years of this technique we are confident the plants are healthier, cleaner for the staff and customers to handle, and we have saved money. The spray operators are much happier applying compost tea with a doser and sprinklers, rather than wearing protective gear in hot weather to apply chemicals. We are also trialing mycorrhizal inoculations and other organic methods to promote plant health without chemical dependence.

Efford-style capillary beds provide consistent watering and drainage. By maintaining correct air-to-water ratios in the compost we can encourage healthy roots and enable the beneficial organisms in the compost tea to thrive.

The future will no doubt bring more problems to occupy our minds but people will always want plants in their lives, so there will always be fresh challenges to keep away the boredom.