

The Nursery Business in the Rocky Mountain Region Yesterday and Today[©]

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to Denver. I have a rare plant nursery here in Denver called Timberline Gardens. We have a large collection of both traditional and low-water-requiring plants. We innovate several new plants every year such as *Antirrhinum* 'Dulcinea's Heart' and *Verbena canadensis* 'Annie'. Our favorite work right now is with our native cacti, agaves, and yuccas. The nursery business has changed so much in the Rocky Mountain Region over the last few decades (mostly for the better)!

GROWING TREES ON THE PRAIRIE

Nurseries grew mostly woody plants in the early 1900s. Denver was a new city on the prairie and growing trees was a tough prospect. Agricultural practices in the 1930s led to the dust bowl era during the great depression. Additionally, extensive bounties on predators lead to a tremendous rabbit population. The rabbits ate everything that was green and the prairie winds stirred up the dust for many years. With new agricultural practices including the planting of windbreaks, the prairie winds were tamed. On the Great Plains we owe a debt of gratitude to the under-appreciated Siberian elm (*Ulmus pumila*). Used extensively in windbreaks, this fast-growing species moderated the wind and over time allowed us to grow more tree species. Now, Denver is a dense forest over 30 miles across with millions of trees. The lowly Siberian elm isn't produced or sold any more and the oldest ones are disappearing as other species such as oaks, maples, and lindens take their place. The innovative nurserymen in the early years tested many new species and one by one they found a foothold here. Now our urban forest has increased humidity levels to a point where we can easily grow Japanese maples and bamboo. On the other hand as our population has greatly exceeded our water supply, it is the urban forest that will suffer the most as the supply of water decreases and the cost increases.

THE CUT FLOWER INDUSTRY

Research conducted at Colorado State University (CSU) spawned a great cut flower industry in Colorado for many decades. Carnation and rose greenhouses often replaced ground where trees and shrubs once grew. Colorado's climate was also ideal for growing many vegetables but unfortunately much farmland and tree land has been taken over for development. In the 1980s much of the cut flower industry moved to South America where labor was cheap. This left Colorado with hundreds of acres of empty greenhouses. Some of these greenhouses were situated in areas suitable for garden center development and others evolved into propagation houses. Many others were just disassembled.

THE RETAIL GARDEN CENTER INDUSTRY

Garden center nurseries traditionally closed in the fall until 20 or 30 years ago. Now, many garden center nurseries stay open for most of the year. There are many reasons for this.

- 1) The Denver Botanic Gardens' passionate plantsman Panayoti Kelaidis began testing and making available many wonderful new plants. So many taxa became available that we couldn't possibly sell them in 3 months.
- 2) The horticulture program at Colorado State University under the inspired work of Dr. Jim Klett began testing and introducing new plants and new growing techniques to both students and to the industry. Passionate students went forth and brought new blood into older businesses.
- 3) Innovative nurserymen across the region began seeing a tremendous increase in interest from their customers for new and exciting plant taxa.

As a result of these elements, the Denver Botanic Gardens, CSU, and the green industry got together and started one of the most successful plant introduction programs in the U.S.A.: Plant Select®.

This new influx of plant selections created a snowball effect. These new plants excited gardeners and designers, which in return encouraged our industry to come up with more new plants. Now we have a big problem: We've created "plant junkies." These people show up at the nursery sometimes more than once a week demanding the hottest new plants.

Apparently without their fix, these poor souls don't sleep properly and lose excessive weight. In reality, we have created a sophisticated gardening audience that in return has given rise to numerous gardening magazines and even a gardening channel on TV.

A NEW PROFESSIONALISM

Many challenges in the last 20 years have led to a new level of professionalism in the nursery industry.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE FAMILY BUSINESS

A big challenge for many family-owned nurseries has been learning to operate a once-seasonal business (with part-time employees) to one that is now year round (with many full-time employees). This strain on the family element often means that nonfamily partners need to be brought into the fold. As the family dynamic changes, businesses often become less and less family oriented. The year-round business requires more professional and more skilled employees. These employees are now career oriented, which ultimately means they will require higher wages and more benefits.

Big Box Stores. Through the 1980s and 1990s, many big box stores that offered nursery products came and went. The current incarnations Home Depot, Lowes, and Walmart offer more plants every season and do it better every year. This has forced the independent nursery to be more innovative to compete.

The Drought. In 2001 and 2002 our region went through a terrible drought. Nurseries were faced with mandatory watering restrictions. Their customers had limited water and in some cases were restricted from installing new plants. In other cases, nurseries didn't have enough water to keep their plants healthy. On 17 March 2003, the Denver area received over 3 ft of snow followed by nearly normal precipitation for several years. Apparently, the drought was over! Regardless, the city remained under watering restrictions for a few years. This forced gardeners and nurserymen alike to "hunker down" again and adapt. Nurseries were filled with more xeric taxa and research was focused on determining the most drought-tolerant plants. During the drought, trees were highly stressed. Over the next few years many of them succumbed to insect invasion and disease. This thinning of the forest made way for new tree taxa to be planted and tested. Forest trees were affected the most. Today, millions of pines are still dying as a result of stress incurred years ago.

The era of planting new landscapes with 70% (required) coverage with Kentucky bluegrass gradually began to change. Home owner associations and municipal zoning requirements slowly caught up with the reality of the drought. The population began to accept that we would never have the abundance of water once available.

The Environmental Protection Agency. In the 1980s, the Environmental Protection Agency increased regulation of many traditional pesticides and stepped up worker safety standards. This forced nurserymen to manage pests and diseases differently. It gave rise to innovative new management practices and fueled the "green" fervor.

Immigration Issues. More recently, regulations on immigration and guest workers have changed the dynamics of the work force in many nurseries. Owners and managers have had to comply with regulations and sometimes train a different workforce.

Economic Stresses. In recent years, the downturn of the economy has made nurserymen cinch their belts and evaluate their product mix and adjust many business practices.

CONCLUSION

Through all of these challenges, the nursery business has thrived. That "hunker down" spirit is a common thread among all nurserymen. We don't give up when times get tough!