

## Danish Nursery Stock: White Swan or Ugly Duckling?®

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### INTRODUCTION

Half of my business of Hortus Advising is in advising Danish nurseries how to produce and how to promote and sell plants. My customers are growing perennials, shrubs, conifers, trees for landscape, hedges, ornamental trees, fruit trees, and roses. The other half of my business is writing marketing material for a garden centre chain, marketing material aimed at consumers, and a year round magazine for the garden centre industry. I have been involved in IPPS since it began in Denmark 1992.

The Danish poet and writer Hans Christian Andersen lived from 1805–1875. One of his fairytales is called *The Ugly Duckling* and tells the story of the young swan that was raised amongst the ducks and therefore not accepted. When it grew up it turned to a beautiful swan.

Only 23 years after Andersen's death, The Danish Nursery Stock Association was started. Production was at that time mostly by hand labour, but soon the Danes invented a range of machines to increase productivity. The Danish machinery company Egedal, for example, remains a major player in the industry internationally.

During more than 100 years the industry has experienced good times and tough times. Good plantmen have worked with plants and machines throughout the seasons in sun, rain, strong winds, and frost. They have been organized in the Danish Nursery Stock Association and have been together in smaller groups to develop the industry they have chosen. Innovation has been and still is very important — and to be able to innovate, you need to be in surplus of both money and time: time to travel, time to exchange your ideas, time to evaluate, and time to plan.

### THE DANISH NURSERY INDUSTRY TODAY

Today 130 million plants are produced every year by Danish nurseries including forestry plants, landscape trees, perennials, shrubs, fruit trees, ornamental trees, roses, and conifers. The market for them is changing. Historically Denmark exported many plants to Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Great Britain but today exports are at their lowest for many years and production is mostly for the home market.

The home market is currently not too bad as the economic situation in Denmark has been very good during the last 10 years. People are paid good money for their work, so they have a lot to spend. When you are producing plants, this is not a positive thing as it makes your wage costs very high. Most of the nurseries have solved a part of this problem by hiring people from other countries. They get the same salary as Danish workers, but work harder for it.

The number of Danish nursery stock nurseries has reduced by a third over the past 10 years. In 2007 there were only 128 nurseries with more than 2 ha of land. However, those remaining have raised their production area by 50% on average and the total number of plants produced is approximately the same as 10 years ago. They are producing in an increasingly competitive market and constantly have

to think about reducing handling costs on the nursery and transport costs to their customers. They also need to look at how they organize their production to make it more efficient. The role of a nursery manager or owner today is also to be able to look into the future to avoid growing plants for which there will be no market.

**Technical Constraints.** The Danish industry has been through a long period of governmental limitations and increasing administrative burdens. One area where this has made a big impact is in crop protection. The list of products that can be applied to plants growing outside consists of just 12 herbicides, 12 fungicides, and 9 insecticides. That might not be a weakness — indeed Danish growers would like to think of it as strength in that the plants that they produce are more tolerant of pests and diseases. Production of a healthy crop is possible, but more difficult than in countries where there is a wider range of crop protection chemistry. The latest government proposal is for all nurseries to make an online record every time they spray.

Most container nurseries use a fully automatic potting machine but not yet transplanters. A number have invested in the Visser Space-O-Mat system (Bowman, 2009)

Field-grown crops are weeded mechanically.

**Marketing Through Plant Fairs.** Nearly every nursery in Denmark puts a lot of effort into participating in plant fairs coordinated by the Danish Nursery Stock Association. They are done well and have a positive side-effect in bringing the industry together and in helping to promote the industry positively to potential new growers.

## CONCLUSION

Looked at from within, life in the Danish nursery industry is no fairytale, even though it may appear so to growers who visit us from other countries. We live in a very secure part of the world and few of our citizens are poor. We produce products that make people feel better and improve the environment. Danish growers, like many of our counterparts in other regions, need to do more to promote ourselves and to say that we are proud about what we do — and maybe then we will be more likely to think of ourselves as the white swans and not the ugly ducklings.

## LITERATURE CITED

- Bowman, C.R.** 2009. Experience with mechanised container plant handling and dispatch. *Comb. Proc. Intl. Plant Prop. Soc.* 59:221–224.