

Ten Basic Principles for Improved Nursery Performance

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INTRODUCTION

I have been involved with commercial horticulture all my life and I am well aware that there have always been cycles of varying prosperity for commercial growers. I am around the same age as IPPS and it is noticeable that in the early years of our society the focus of meetings was mainly on improved techniques for propagating and growing plants. Improved methods generated better plants more efficiently and improved the profitability of growers.

However it is noticeable that despite the increase in knowledge there are some nurseries that prospered and some that did not. Conference organisers obviously made the same observation and adapted their subject matter accordingly. The subjects covered in later years show the recognition of the increasing importance of mechanisation, marketing, and business skills.

My period of service on the International Board has enabled me to see, and compare a wide range of management techniques in most of our member regions. That period has coincided with a period of changing global economy and difficult trading conditions for most growers. It has been interesting comparing the strategies that have been adopted to maintain viability and build for the future. My impression is that there are no quick fixes, rather a series of basic principles that are common to successful growers worldwide.

FORWARD PLANNING

Most places make an effort to tidy up for visitors, but there are some nurseries that stand out from the crowd, because their whole enterprise and culture is logical. It is obvious that a great deal of thought has gone into what they do and how they do it.

Anything and everything that can be planned has been planned. With greater demands for uniformity of product it is important to have a nursery layout that provides uniform growing conditions when needed. Production plans have been integrated with sales demands and the pressures of short notice despatch requirements. Batch potting has been used to reduce travelling between cultivars at harvest time and to give a longer sales period. Bed dimensions facilitate ease of mechanised trimming, counting, spraying, and spray calculations. A skilled workforce is a very valuable asset so time has been spent planning how best to use their skills and maintain their job satisfaction.

FOCUS ON QUALITY

Everyone claims to be a quality producer, but who is the judge. There are many definitions of quality, but to me the simplest, yet deepest definition is the following workplace sign that I spotted on a nursery several years ago. "Quality is a smiling customer."

Discerning customers, who buy on quality, will be more loyal than those who are always seeking lower prices. Those customers recognise that there is more profit, and less waste, to be had by paying a little extra for quality plants.

The nurseries that stand out to me are the ones that have identified their target market and planned a production system to meet the requirements of that market. Total quality regimes encompass all elements of the business, not just the final grading process. Nurseries that focus on high standards in propagation and young plant stages benefit from less waste at the later more expensive stages of plant growth. Well-trimmed, well-branched young plants reduce inputs to the final pot stage.

Having grown good plants it is important to follow this through with good presentation and service. Anything that helps the retailer sell plants faster will keep their customer smiling.

RECORD KEEPING

Traceability is vital to plant production. Whether we are trying to repeat successes or solve problems it is important to have accurate records of all factors involved in the growing process. Whilst we cannot control all the things that nature sends our way it is useful to be able to identify what the optimum growing conditions are so that we can do our best to provide these conditions and avoid threats. Improvements need a base point to measure from. I have observed that much of the information that was once kept in closely guarded notebooks is now displayed on notice boards near to the work area. Computerisation allows much easier recording, sorting of information, and presentation of results. Statistical process control has been imported from car factories to potting sheds and improved our problem solving capabilities.

STAFF INVOLVEMENT

The most noticeable factor that is common to the best nurseries worldwide is the enthusiasm of the employees. The owners have recognised the wealth of knowledge accumulated by key staff and involved them in planning nursery improvements. They have shared in the ownership of the resulting success and a really good team spirit has evolved. When the operators have been involved in the planning process the new systems will meet with less resistance and have a greater chance of success than if they are imposed on staff by top management.

CUSTOMER INVOLVEMENT

Some growers visit customers regularly, others invite customers to visit the nursery. The key factor is to encourage discussion and react to the feedback that clients provide. Retailers have more contact with the eventual consumer and will also have experience of which other products sell well. Garden designers have influence on trends and can help forecast future demands. Customers are encouraged to provide suggestions of plants that they would like but cannot obtain normally. If the challenge is to make your customers smile, it can be extended to include internal customers. Often there are departments within a nursery who supply each other. The best nurseries enable them to communicate their needs and compliment each other when things go well.

BUILD ON YOUR STRENGTHS

Some nurseries stand out from the crowd because they have identified elements that they are particularly good at, or circumstances that give them the edge over their competitors, and then concentrated their resources in these specific areas. Equally they may have identified things that they find difficult or unprofitable and reduced or eliminated them. The consequences are enhanced reputation, improved profitability, and increased job satisfaction all around.

SIMPLIFY OPERATIONS

As successful nurseries develop and expand there is a tendency to become increasingly complicated. The dangers of complexity are that quality control and efficiency become more difficult to manage. With careful planning this can be avoided. Some nurseries have used method study or lean management to develop efficient systems. They may then document this in method statements, which detail the best way to perform each task. Large nurseries may be divided into specialist divisions to maintain focus and manageability whilst retaining their overall economies of scale. Simplified operations can help overcome communication difficulties that occur with increasing seasonal peaks and casual labour.

WISHFUL THINKING

The IPPS has been very instrumental in the process of continuous improvement throughout the nursery industry and the transfer of knowledge has been beneficial to all members. However it is interesting that there are more imitators than innovators, so there is a vital factor that sets the innovators apart. I describe that factor as wishful thinking. Rather than just modifying existing methods and equipment the real innovators imagine the dream scenario where everything succeeds. They start with “wouldn't it be great if...” and then seek to eliminate the factors that prevent their desired result. Sometimes new equipment or techniques are developed; sometimes a complete new system is needed. Occasionally it may involve a complete break with tradition, but more often it involves a return to basic principles that may have been neglected during the process of gradual progress.

TRIALS

Whatever the source of new ideas it is important to conduct trials, in commercial conditions, before making major changes to established methods. The scale of the trial will depend on how way out the experiment is, but should always start with a clear objective and be accurately recorded at all stages. Successful nurseries are always open to new ideas and they generally have trials in progress at all times. The resulting knowledge will be invaluable when future developments are undertaken.

SEEK AND SHARE

Although the benefits of seeking and sharing plant knowledge have been well proven over the past 60 years, it is still noticeable that some members have a much more open approach to learning than others. Whilst some growers only visit nurseries that produce similar crops to themselves, the smart ones realise that there

is much to be learned from more diverse sources. Many of the management techniques now familiar in horticulture have been developed in other manufacturing industries. Logistics and ergonomics are common challenges to all production sites.

Leading nurseries are normally willing hosts to visitors. They recognise that in return for sharing their knowledge they will gain from the observations of the visitors and the questions raised may stimulate ideas for future innovation.

CONCLUSION

Obviously these ten points do not cover all the elements involved in managing a nursery. There are important marketing and financial principles that other people are better qualified than I am to identify.

With the inevitable changes that our industry must make in coming years it will be interesting to monitor future developments and try to recognise which factors have the most influence on business success.