

Learning from Changes in the Marketing of Plants

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of history is to learn from the lessons and experiences of the past for use in the present and future. This paper presents a brief history of ornamental horticulture over the last 40 years and draws some personal conclusions about the present and future of our industry, and in particular about the market.

1950s

- In this decade we heard the first warnings about the dangers of organic phosphate insecticides.
- It was a decade of flower and vegetable shows.
- The rose was **the** plant—Britain's Royal National Rose Society had over 50,000 members in 1957.
- Public parks were popular—they were full of colourful displays of bedding plants, roses, and herbaceous borders, all set off by acres of neatly trimmed grass.
- We had no garden centres, only nurseries, and no plant retailers—nurserymen sold to the public.
- All the plants sold were either bare root or balled in sacks.
- We sold our plants in the autumn and early spring.
- The Dutch supplied many plants to the U.K. market.
- There was no training.
- There were no herbicides just hoes.
- Life was simple, poorly paid, and jolly hard work.

1960s

Horticulture probably advanced in this decade more than it had during all of the previous 100 years. It certainly set the pattern for the production and selling of ornamental plants as we know it today. The 'New Towns' were started, with them came a new concept in landscape design. The conventional park and its bedding displays were replaced in the new developments with shelter belts of trees and informal plantings of a wide range of foliage and flowering shrubs.

The first favourite in plants was still the rose—largely promoted by colourful nurserymen like Harry Wheatcroft and Sam McGreedy—whose great personalities alone must have sold plants.

Then came perhaps the biggest step that ornamental horticulture had ever taken, it has had a profound effect on gardening, nurserymen, and the society—the garden centre. It came from North America. It was dedicated to selling. It demanded plants available for sale 12 months of the year. As a direct result we saw the first pot-grown plants as we know them today. First in old ice cream containers,

which were smelly and the plants were almost impossible to remove. The rose now had competitors—flowering shrubs and conifers.

Ice cream cans began to be replaced by polybags, watering became irrigation, pots became containers, and John Innes compost became too heavy.

Peat-based composts were introduced. They were lighter and grew better plants, but also grew even bigger and better weeds.

We saw the start of dedicated hardy ornamental nursery stock research, which helped with composts watering regimes and herbicides.

1970s

The Garden Centre Association was formed and garden centres became bigger, stocked more types of merchandise, and demanded better service.

Plants sold as long as they were green and a new word came into horticulture, containerized, which meant “green tops, little root, and will probably survive.”

The Dutch continued to pour stock into the U.K.

The first attempt to bring our fragmented industry together was launched by an industry personality of the time—Mike Edwards. It was called the Development Council and it failed.

Plants continued selling despite record inflation. However, a new fashion emerged—self sufficiency. Shrub beds and lawns were dug up and replanted with fruits and vegetables. Container production continued to increase, by now many different genera were available as container-grown plants.

In 1978 the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food recorded production of 28 million container plants.

1980s

This decade will be remembered for the speed of changes which occurred. This was evident in plant fashions. Self sufficiency had gone, roses had waned in popularity. Conifers and heathers were the “in thing” in 1980 but by 1989 interest was beginning to fade. Bedding plants and herbs became the “in fashion” plants.

It was the decade of National Garden Festivals held at Liverpool, Stoke-on-Trent, and Gateshead, great events and tremendous promotion events for gardening and plants.

By the mid 1980s we saw the rise of the garden centre consultant—who turned garden centres from retail nurseries and plant centres into true retailers. Consultants introduced terms and jargon such as “reserve orders”, “stock turn”, “stock levels”, and “ranging”. Plants became “green goods” or “core products”.

1990s

So here we are in the last decade of the century, and what have we got?

A nursery stock industry worth about £235 million at wholesale value. Current production of container plants running at 160 million plants per year. Nearly 6000 hectares down to field grown nursery stock. Some 3000 nurseries in England and Wales.

Between 1500 and 2000 retail garden centres supporting the gardening pastime valued at £1.3 billion per year.

LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE

What can we learn from the last 40 years that may help us plan and thrive in the next 5 to 10 years?

We still have a fragmented industry, with nearly 3000 nurseries and 90% of them are under 5 ha. We still do not cooperate. Cooperation has been tried and it has failed several times in the last 40 years. We do need greater cooperation within the growing industry because our wholesale customers are getting bigger and more sophisticated by the day.

The last 40 years have proved that fashions in plants change: roses, conifers, heathers, trees, and fruits have all come and gone as major sellers. Herbaceous plants, herbs, bedding, and patio plants are currently in fashion. Such changes in fashion will undoubtedly continue. Colour has now started to affect the sales of certain plants. Changes will be faster.

Quality, service, and presentation have all moved forward. They will continue to do so. We shall have to strive to reach new levels in quality. Continuity will perhaps be the biggest challenge for the ornamental nurserymen in the years ahead.

Concepts in presentation will also change. We shall be led by ideas from other industries, which will have to be adapted to suit our particular needs.

We have seen the pace of change accelerate from 1980. This will not slow down. So all change will have to be accomplished in the minimum of time.