

Observations of Sixty Years in the Nursery Industry: Then and Now[©]

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INTRODUCTION

There are a lot of differences in today's wholesale nursery business and what I remember 60 years ago. My first exposure to the nursery business was a summer job at Tingle Nursery between my junior and senior year of high school.

Among the many changes, the six most significant, in my opinion, have been:

- 1) Greater equipment availability for nursery operations.
- 2) The shift from field to container growing.
- 3) The change in workforce composition from local to offshore labor sources.
- 4) Climate change – winters are much milder.
- 5) Product mix – from limited to a diverse range of plant materials.
- 6) Government regulation – from minimal to greater involvement.

THE SIX MOST SIGNIFICANT CHANGES IN THE NURSERY INDUSTRY

Greater Equipment Availability for Nursery Operations

In the post World War II period, nursery businesses did not have mechanical planters, potting machines, fork lifts, misting systems and other specialized nursery equipment, which are commonly used in nurseries today.

To illustrate, I will share some personal recollections. In the 1940s and 1950s, I grew up on a small family farm of 30.4 ha (75 acre) near Salisbury on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. My wife, Lou, and I still live there. Some of you may remember visiting there in the early 1990s as part of the IPPS tour during the Southern Region meeting in Ocean City, Maryland.

In 1955, I returned to the family farm after college and my Dad let me use about an acre to start a nursery. As an example of equipment used then, our first propagation set-up was a 1.8×5.5 m (6×18 ft) unheated deep cold frame with concrete block walls supporting a half dozen 0.9×1.8 m (3×6 ft) glass sash panels. Ventilation, when required, consisted of lifting one end of the sash and propping it open with a brick.

In 1956, I bought a used Howard walk-behind rototiller to till-in imported, German peat moss into the sandy loam soil to create ground beds. We planted the rooted cuttings at close spacing in 1.5 m (5 ft) wide beds shaded with snow fence.

After 2 years these small liners were hand transplanted at 0.6×0.6 m (24×24 in.) spacings in raised beds for two more years. We also had planted tree & shrub liners in field rows. In the first few years we dug all plants with sharp spades, burlaped them and wheeled them out of the beds or fields in wheelbarrows or 2-wheeled carts.

In the early years, we used small farm tractors in our operation, but I remember mules and horses were still used in some larger nurseries on the East Coast and in the South. Agricultural equipment used in vegetable and fruit production was in the earliest stages of being adapted to nursery production. There was a great deal of hard, physical work required in the nurseries of that era.

Conversely, a wide range of labor-saving equipment is now available, allowing greater, more diverse plant production with fewer people. Our inventory, payroll and accounting records were hand compiled and kept in loose leaf binders. Computers did not enter the picture until the 1970s. Our first computer was half the size of a refrigerator and very slow by today's standards. Today, off the shelf software and inexpensive hardware are readily available. Tracking inventory is much faster and easier. Computer technology has been an important part of enhancing the productivity and growth of our industry.

The Shift from Field to Container Growing

The second major change is in the shift from in-ground field growing to above-ground container production. It started on the West Coast after World War II and was called “container growing”.

My original exposure to this new production method came about in an unusual way. To fund the growth of our small nursery, we did local landscape jobs which sometimes required finished plants we did not have. During 1956 and 1957, I occasionally drove down to Suffolk, Virginia and purchased plants at Coleman’s Nursery and Garden Center. The plants were grown in metal cans. I did business with Mr. Art Lancaster, who was one of the early East Coast growers switching to above ground, container production.

I was intrigued with the potential advantages of growing plants in containers, so we started planting some items in cans. As an example of how primitive the new system was at that time, our first pots were #10 and larger tin cans used in food production. We got a lot of them from the local Campbell Soup plant.

Manually, but with as much efficiency as we could utilize, we dipped the cans, punched holes for drainage, filled the pots with a sand/peat mix, and planted liners in the tin cans. We managed to get two crops of about 20,000 *Ilex*, *Pieris*, *Cotoneaster*, *Juniperus*, and *Pyracantha* to supplement our bed grown azaleas and rhododendrons. Our winter production consisted of jamming all the pots close together. That worked fine the first winter, but the next winter we had an extended freeze. Except for some junipers, almost all the plants were killed or damaged enough that most of both crops had to be thrown out.

That was probably the toughest time in our early nursery business. It took about 15 years for us to creep back into container production in hoop houses or under poly blankets. But as we all know, container growing has flourished and is now the major part of nursery production today.

The Change in Workforce Composition from Local to Offshore Labor Sources

The third major change from back then to now is the work force. During the 1960s, our work force was about evenly split between black and white employees from our local area. Our original payroll records show 11-h work days and 66-h work weeks during the busy season. Both the labor mix and the work schedule were typical of many agricultural operations and nurseries at that time. Some of the larger nurseries also employed some migrant labor during the busiest times.

Within a few years it became increasingly difficult to find local labor willing to do the tough field work. Getting a field crew to show up on Saturdays or Mondays was always a challenge!

We started recruiting employees from out of our local area. Some were from declining dairies or small farm operations. Eventually this led to our searching much farther afield and recruiting workers from Puerto Rico, and later, Mexico. Everyone in the business is aware of the make up of the nursery industry workforce today. For sure is it distinctly different from our workforce of 50 years ago.

Climate Change – Winters Are Much Milder

The fourth major change is weather. Winters in the eastern USA have been considerably milder in recent years than those of 30 to 50 years ago.

In 1977 *Time Magazine* ran a cover story about the frigid weather that winter. They called it the “Freeze of the Century”. An extended 5-week cold spell resulted in the Chesapeake Bay freezing over. Frost penetration burst water pipes 0.6 m (24 in.) or more underground. Over half of our 1977 crop was unsalable due to freeze damage. Substantial loss was inflicted on younger plants as well. Now nurseries throughout the Eastern U.S. routinely grow and ship plants to locations where they were not considered hardy 50 years ago.

Product Mix – from Limited to a Diverse Range of Plant Materials

The fifth major change is product mix. The milder weather conditions have in part contributed to a more diverse product mix. Other factors include new and patented cultivars, branded plants, market demand for color, outdoor living lifestyles, deer resistance, etc.

When I started 57 years ago there was a trend to focus on a narrow segment of plant types. We shifted from growing many different shrubs and trees to specializing in larger quantities of broad leaved evergreens. During the last 10 years I have noticed the trend back to a much wider range of plants. George Hackney probably recently said it best: “We used to grow a lot of a few items - now we grow a few of a lot of items.”

Government Regulation – from Minimal to Greater Involvement

The last big change on my list is the increased role of government. When I started we did not have to apply for a building permit, although we built quite a few different buildings on the nursery. We never had to seek approval for the quantity of irrigation water we needed, or report how much we used. We never had to ask a prospective employee for an I-9 card. We did not have to spend much time on forms or reports to government agencies. Government did not want to “do so much for everybody”.

The regulations and particularly the regulators are generally more stringent. I believe the spirit of cooperation is less evident now, and the enforcement is often more adversarial. On that subject, if any of you missed Richard May’s comments at Valdosta last October, take the time to read them in the Southern Region section of the 2011 *Combined Proceedings of the International Plant Propagators Society*. His comments on dealing with our government agencies are on the mark.

For many years land grant University instructors, researchers, and extension professionals have played an important role in the growth and business success of the nursery industry. In my opinion other parts of government supported programs have become more burdensome over the past 50 years.

SUMMARY

My take is there are some pluses and minuses in comparing “then vs. now”. I believe it is more difficult to build a successful new wholesale nursery today than when I started.

To begin with, the cost of entry is much higher. The future workforce supply is uncertain, and therefore a huge issue. The role of government is increasing moving in the wrong direction. The excellence of product is much higher today. Quality and service is better and more consistent than when I started. While that is a good thing for the consumer, it raises the bar and is a significant challenge for new growers entering the industry.

When I think back about the “old days”, I remember that there were surely some tough times. However, if I ask myself what would I change about choosing the nursery business for a career, I am reminded how often I have said “it has been a wonderful way to make a living” – and it really has! Maybe I was just at the right place at the right time. I am always aware of how much my family and I have benefitted from being a part of IPPS and the nursery industry. I never imagined, while growing up on a small family farm, that I might get to travel the world and meet so many nice people. I hope all the younger folks in the audience today will be as fortunate as I have been. Remember that this IPPS society can play a part in that, if you choose to participate!

