

Experiences of Running a Specialist Retail Nursery[©]

Peter Chapman

Perryhill Nurseries Ltd, Hartfield, East Sussex TN7 4JP, U.K.

Email: peter@perryhillnurseries.co.uk

INTRODUCTION

Perryhill Nurseries is a production and retail nursery established in 1972 and selling direct to the public, landscape designers, and institutions. The author joined the company in 1979 and was lucky enough to be able to buy into it after the original owner, Sue Gemmell, died. His wife, Sue, joined the company originally working part time in the growing area before taking on the day-to-day office duties.

Sales are split into three groups: cash sales at the till, mail order sales, and sales on account which are paid against an invoice.

The company is a production nursery, propagating on site as much as possible but topped up with bought-in liners and finished plants. It is not a garden centre and the aim is to remain as a plant-based business.

POSITIVE INFLUENCES

Customer Communications

As with many other industries we have benefited from the internet allowing virtually instant access to information for us and our customers. Our catalogue is online and we have seen increases in the numbers of people visiting our website and in business resulting from it year on year since we introduced it. At present there is no on-line ordering but we are working on this.

We have a computer in the sales area with our catalogue and the *RHS Plantfinder* always open and available for use by our staff to help our customers to find plants for specific purposes and those we do not stock, this may sound strange to send customers elsewhere but it is a service and does mean that they remember us as being helpful and will ask again for help and advice.

RHS Plantfinder is a massive list of plants and who stocks them, it does have its limits as the lists are prepared in November but not published until the following May (to coincide with the RHS Chelsea Flower Show).

The *Rose Locator* is a web-based guide (www.roselocator.com) which works in the same way as the *RHS Plantfinder* though I have found that it can sometimes be out of date in respect of the details of which nurseries supply which plants. I am not sure if growers always realise they are on it – as when we submitted a list of what we stock it was published almost immediately.

Shoot is a gardening website (www.shootgardening.co.uk) which will recommend a nursery as a supplier for plants listed on the website.

These forms of communication have led to a reduction in traditional advertising which we found to be largely a waste of money.

Email has proven to be a fantastic cheap form of contact. We email newsletters and information about special offers to our customers. We receive most enquiries this way and it now far outstrips telephone and postal contacts.

Stock Control

We grow what we want and are able to predict when stock will be available to fulfill orders. For the patient customer we will grow to order.

Stock plants can be correctly identified by us before there is a problem. Purchased in stock may be sold before it flowers and it may be difficult to identify if it is incorrectly named. We can grow plants that are not widely available from our own stock.

Time Management

Running a small specialist nursery may give the flexibility to organise your own time off when you want it.

Staff and Management Relationships

With a small number of staff you have close working relationships and you get to know individuals' strengths and weaknesses. They can trust us and this worked to everyone's advantage.

Many people view the idea of running a business with a partner who is also your husband or wife as tricky but we have found that we both know the job we are doing. Sue deals with the office and the limited advertising and I deal with the purchases, production, and sales. Advantages include the additional level of trust and understanding of common goals, and easier time management

The Trade Itself

I have been in the trade for 40 years and have built up long term relationships with suppliers and customers, many who have become friends. I can honestly say that I am glad I entered this profession and would urge anyone with a love for plants to consider it as a worthwhile career.

NEGATIVE INFLUENCES

Customer Communications

Emails are very friendly but if you receive an email along the lines of: "Hi have you any berberis and if so can you send me some, Yours Sid", it will quite often take several exchanges to get the full details of what somebody actually wants.

Some seemingly genuine orders can be scams and it can be difficult to always pick them out before some work has already been undertaken. One Ukrainian enquiry, which was quite plant specific, proved to be a scam. This came to light through the potential client specifying their own carrier, a company which turned out not to exist.

Stock Identification

We have noticed a large increase in the amount of incorrectly identified supplied stock including lavender, fuchsia, sedum, ceanothus, and roses. Some of these are because the plant is inherently unstable, such as *Lavatera* 'Barnsley'. As a plant-orientated business it is one of our most important selling points that we have correct stock, and incorrect supplies cause us much wasted time trying to sort out what the plants are and then putting things right with our customers. Suppliers are nearly always helpful with refunds but we have noticed the odd occasion when an incorrect plant is still supplied in the future even when the supplier has been advised it is incorrect: including *Pittosporum tenuifolium* 'Abbotsbury Gold' supplied for 'Golden King' and *Abelia* × *grandiflora* 'Goldsport' supplied as 'Frances Mason'.

Time Management

The cost of staff is our largest overhead and with the economic downturn, things are tight so we tend to do extra work ourselves as the business owners which staff would normally want overtime for. With a small number of staff it is always difficult covering when they are on holiday, ill, or at busy weekends. We do now have a core of part timers who we use in the busy season and who help out at weekends.

Official Bureaucracy

Although there is sound reasoning for many of the records small nurseries are asked to keep and the forms they are asked to complete, they do feel like a time-consuming burden and some are really an additional tax earning opportunity or a waste of time. It is not just

the regulations but all of the telephone time taken up fending off the various companies who want to charge you to do these things for you.

Profitability

Relying on profit to reinvest is difficult as the cost and procedures for borrowing are complicated and expensive. A bank overdraft is not a problem but increasing it will incur extra charges or a change in what the bank allows. When we asked for a loan there was no problem other than the bank wanted to take a charge against our personal property and would not use the company house as collateral.

Running a Business with a Partner Who Is Also Your Husband or Wife

This brings high financial risks as both partners are relying on the one business. There is no separation between business and home, though this has not been a problem for us as the business has always been a way of life with the whole family involved when the children were of school age. It is not easy, however, to stick to regular hours as an employee would.

