

## A POTPOURRI OF IDEAS

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The nursery industry has passed through many phases during the last thirty years. Firstly, we had the container revolution when many companies shifted from field-grown stock to container production. This led to numerous technological changes, especially in growing grounds, media, and nutrients. The next phase of development was the propagation revolution with the onset of mist-controlled systems, fogging units, and tissue culture. We are now experiencing a third revolution, the marketing revolution, which is taking the form of technological advancements such as bar coding, packaging and presentation, and higher quality standards. On top of this we have to overlay the fact that society is going “green” and whatever we do must be environmentally friendly.

You may ask how the marketing revolution affects the propagator, especially as we are told we have to be market-driven rather than production-driven if we are to survive as businesses until the next century, which happens to be only 3,739 days away. I believe as propagators we have, fortunately or unfortunately, everyone as a customer. We have internal customers within the nursery and customers through the traditional market avenues. If we are to be market-driven it has to start with the propagator.

**What does this mean?** Gone are the days when we could just produce plants and pass them on down the chain. We now need market research on what sells and what does not. We need strict quality standards, and we need to change our attitudes to what is right for the market place, and not necessarily what in our opinion is what we believe they should have.

What I will expand on in this paper is one small aspect of this revolution, and how it is changing our industry.

Traditionally we have grown up thinking pots are round containers, their only variation being in size, although occasionally companies have told us that square is better than round.

Round pots are great for growing plants, but is that what is asked of us in the marketing revolution? Already the round pot, as you and I know it, is being challenged in the market place.

The round pot is being challenged on two fronts: firstly, does it produce the desired product and secondly, does it enhance the product by “adding value” to the plants we have grown?

**Desired Products.** Carl Whitcombe’s work in the U.S.A. has already challenged our thinking on the traditional pot. Quality of plants starts with a good root system and, for many subjects, the

worst thing you can do is put it in a round pot. The result will be roots curling around the pot, and, on woody subjects, this can do permanent damage and reduce the long term quality of the plant, even though it may leave the nursery looking A1.

To overcome this, we need to rethink our whole approach to pot design, and many manufacturers have already started challenging our traditional thinking.

In Europe it is now possible to purchase pots that have ridges going down the pot to encourage roots—when they hit the pot side—to move down and not around the pot.

Carl Whitcombe has produced his elaborately designed pots that are used successfully to produce trees in Australia, whilst Carter Holt Ltd. is selling the Rootainer container in Australasia with the same objective of improving plant quality.

**Adding Value.** We may need to rethink our whole approach to production and marketing. Very few other industries market their product in the manufacturing container. If we are to “add value” to our plants we may need to consider repotting. The West German “Meerslag” container system was ideal as a “manufacturing” system, allowing various options for packaging at the marketing stage but, unfortunately, it never really caught on. I am sure somebody at this stage is thinking—what about the extra cost? Let us be honest. We need to get more money for our product if we are going to attract new people to our industry and invest in the future. Surely, the easiest option we have is to make our product look like it is worth more. This is the principle of “adding value.”

The best example of “adding value” through pot design has been the introduction of ‘Potfulls’, which in six months has firmly established itself in the marketplace in the U.K. and U.S.A.

‘Potfulls’ have designed wedge-shaped containers that fit into an outer patio container. These containers are designed to allow the customer to mix and match plants as often as they wish, the result being plant material “turnover” in the garden centre more often and, if we follow that down the chain, it means the propagator has to propagate more plants on a regular timetable.

Probably the greatest marketing challenge is for us to start growing plants in environmentally friendly containers. U.S.A. research informs us that the customer will be prepared to spend more on a product that is packaged in an environmentally friendly way. The resultant pot may be a peat/paper-based pot, such as those recently launched in Australasia (and which are commonly used in the U.S.A. and Europe), or a plastic pot that is environmentally friendly. (The Dutch have such a product).

### **The Challenge of the 90’s.**

The challenge of the 90’s must be for all of us to be market-driven. This means we will all need to think like customers. It should

affect everything you do, and it will challenge conventional thinking on quality standards, containers, and on what really sells! This challenge starts at propagation. If that fails, so does the company.

The 90's should be exciting with many new challenges. Let us ensure we all think like winners and put the customer first!.