The Nursery Stock Industry In Northern Ireland

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INTRODUCTION

The nursery stock industry in Northern Ireland is relatively small and diverse, when compared to that in Great Britain, with growers often also involved in retailing and landscaping. The domestic market is characterised by limited opportunities, given that Northern Ireland is a small region with a total population of 1.5 million. Growers tend to grow what they know they can sell and expansion of the industry is dependant on exports.

At present the level of exports is low, being estimated at approximately £500,000 per annum, mainly going to Great Britain.

THE SIZE OF THE INDUSTRY

Nurseries in the Province are basically all family businesses with an average size nursery growing 100,000 plants and probably employing 4 or 5 people. Nurseries range in size from those which are quite small and perhaps specialising in alpines, heathers, or other crops to those which grow in the region of 200,000 plants. Of the 80 or so businesses involved in growing plants, approximately 55 have their main activity in production. Another 25 businesses are retail nurseries or garden centres producing around 25% of their own stock for sale. Total output is approximately £5.5m to £6m at wholesale prices. There is a lack of structure in the industry with no formal marketing groups.

CROPS GROWN

The climate is suitable for growth of a wide range of temperate ornamental plants. There are fewer climatic extremes than in Great Britain, with lower summer temperatures but milder winters. Rainfall averages from 60 to 72 in. in the west to 25 to 30 in. in the east. Crops which grow well include shrubs such as *Hebe*, *Ceanothus*, and *Escallonia*, as well as roses, climbers, alpines, and heathers.

There are a few small-scale growers of trees from seed. Production of field-grown trees (by budding) is limited. There is little, if any, bench grafting due to lack of tradition.

There are readily available sources of peat from a large number of suppliers.

AMENITY AND PUBLIC SECTOR MARKET

The amenity or public sector market is static or declining. The main reasons for this are reduced government expenditure and the impact of "contracting out" of local authority services to the private sector with the result that a lot of landscape planting schemes are now smaller. There is, however, a wider range of plant material generally used in these schemes than in the past. The demand for plants for the landscape sector is more likely to come now from community group schemes or commercial developments such as hotels and offices.

RETAIL MARKET

Undoubtedly one of the major developments in horticulture in the past 5 years has been the expansion and development of retail garden centres. In Northern Ireland there are now 12 relatively large garden centres with coffee shops and attractive layouts to encourage customer purchases. Some growers have moved into retailing from growing, encouraged by the demand in their area. Nurseries that have diversified into retailing still grow perhaps one or two crops, such as bedding plants, and are usually located near population centres of 20,000 to 50,000 people.

Northern Ireland consumers tend to have very favourable disposable incomes compared to counterparts in other United Kingdom regions. There is the potential for garden centre chains or groups to develop in Northern Ireland in line with trends in other areas of Great Britain. If this happens it could change the market dramatically for local growers.

The signs are that the larger sized garden centres are going to develop more rapidly and it may become more difficult for new entrants to successfully establish garden centre businesses in certain areas. There are increasing pressures on small garden centres to invest to better meet the needs of the modern consumer and thereby to compete more successfully with the larger centres. There are signs that some of the small garden centres are calling it a day and are diversifying into growing or some other aspect of the business, or possibly completely disengaging from the sector.

IMPORTS

In a recent survey of the 10 larger sized garden centres, the Department for Agriculture, Northern Ireland (DANI), found that while some garden centres buy 86% of their stock from Northern Ireland, others buy as little as 16%. Over recent years there has been a trend towards buying more stock from outside Northern Ireland. This trend has been driven by the increasing demand for a greater range and quality of plants supported with good service. Northern Ireland growers are working hard to meet this challenge but do not always have the range of stock when it is required. This survey showed that Northern Ireland growers supplied 49% of the plant material purchased by the sample group of 10 garden centres. Of the imported stock, 18% came from the Republic of Ireland and 33% from other areas, mainly Great Britain. Imports from Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland have increased while those from Holland have decreased. These figures indicate the potential for import substitution. However, the production of a wide range of high quality, competitively priced plants in line with customer requirements will be vital to ensure the success of locally based nurseries in this respect.

PRICES

Prices obtained for nursery stock in Northern Ireland have been low compared with those in Great Britain. This is perhaps because of lower labour and some raw material costs and also the size of the market. In a small market it is easy to have over production in some lines and this has occurred from time to time resulting in downward pressure on prices. There may be some signs that this is changing especially with the impact of severe losses experienced in the winter of 1995-96. It is difficult for growers to sustain these losses when they are not always receiving an adequate price for their product.

PROPAGATION

Systems are similar to those used in other areas with mist still being the main method of propagation. Quite a range of plants is propagated under polythene systems and there are a few fog systems. Some fog systems have not worked as well in small tunnels where the temperature is difficult to control in the hotter periods of the year. However, a number of the fog systems are working well where they are managed effectively.

One grower has had the novel idea of using cold water to reduce the temperature in his propagation beds in summer. The cold water is taken from a deep quarry and circulated round the base heating pipes and this cools the propagation bed down sufficiently to contribute to increased rooting. The idea came from borehole cooling which is used in the mushroom industry. The water from the quarry is approximately 5C and is circulated when the temperature exceeds 30C. This was very effective in 1995 when summer temperatures were unusually high. Each bed is fed separately with a supply of hot or cold water controlled by a motorised valve activated by a thermostat. The poles on the electronic thermostat are reversed so that once the bed temperature exceeds 30C, the motorised valve will open and allow cold water to circulate and reduce the bed temperature. This system operates between 11 AM and 4 PM. Operation of the system on a 24-h basis was found to reduce the rate of rooting through excessive cooling.

STOCK PLANTS

There is a mixed provision of stock plant material by the industry. Some growers are able to use cuttings from growing stock or liners. One system developed to propagate ×*Cupressocyparis leylandii* 'Castlewellan' is based on maintaining the juvenility of the stock plant by cutting back the mother plants severely to a flat top. A number of crops of cuttings can then be taken. Growth can be manipulated by foliar feeding. When the stock plant is initially cut back it takes some time to recover and in total it probably takes about three seasons to establish these stock plants to a reasonable level of cropping. The cuttings taken from the stock plants are juvenile and root very readily under mist.

GROWING SYSTEMS

With the increasing demand for uniform and high quality plants, the Horticulture and Crops Development Division of DANI has encouraged growers to make more use of capillary sandbeds. After building some small-scale sandbeds at Greenmount College some growers have adopted the system. The advantages of reduced water usage, more uniform plant growth, and the potential to produce higher quality plants with less labour input are now crucial. Slighter coarser sand than that specified by HRI, Efford, in the south of England, is recommended for outdoor sandbeds in Northern Ireland because of the higher rainfall here.

There is less increase in compost pH of containers grown on sandbeds, compared with overhead irrigation, where water is hard and has a high lime content.

DEVELOPMENT OF CAPILLARY SANDBED TECHNOLOGY

Two growers have investigated the use of woven polypropylene materials on top of capillary sandbeds to reduce maintenance. Provided pots have good contact with the material and the water level is kept higher, then the system works effectively. There

is a trend for growers to use woven polypropylene materials as growing surfaces for reasons of hygiene and ease of maintenance. Costs can be saved through reduced herbicide use.

At Greenmount College copper-impregnated groundcover fabric has been used on sandbeds. The copper helps prevent weed germination and prevents rooting through.

HORTICULTURE BUSINESS AND SYSTEMS DEVELOPMENT SUPPORT TO THE NURSERY STOCK INDUSTRY

The purpose of the Department of Agriculture for Northern Ireland is to promote economic growth and the development of the countryside in Northern Ireland. Horticulture and Crops Development Division (HCDD) assists with the development of a comprehensive commercial horticulture industry in line with market opportunities by developing the competencies and values of people through business and technology programmes. Technology programmes involve the development and demonstration, leading towards commercialisation and adoption, of promising new production and management technologies emerging from research programmes. These programmes involve HCDD staff using resources at Greenmount College and working closely with growers. HCDD staff also coordinate with Marketing Development Division colleagues to assist with marketing initiatives, such as the recently produced nursery stock trade directory.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

- The retail market continues to increase in importance. Some large independents or retail groups may enter the expanding market.
- Only a small number of nurseries will be capable of investing to supply garden centres with the quantity, range, and service they need.
- Other growers are tending to change their production in one or a number of the following ways: becoming more specialist, possibly in retailing; contract growing; supplying landscape markets; supplying garden centres in niche crops.
- More nursery stock is being grown under protection to reduce winter damage and enable market requirements to be met more precisely.
- In the future more scheduling or programming of plant production to provide plants in colour when the market needs them will be required. Various techniques such as chemical treatments and cold treatments will be used to manipulate root and foliage growth as well as flowering.

This industry continues to change rapidly and will provide exciting challenges for both growers and retailers in the future. As propagators and growers it is vital to take account of changes in retail buying trends in order to constantly modify production accordingly. The increasing demand for a wider range of new and worthy plants provides growers with opportunities to lead the market.

The ready availability of land, a mild humid climate, coupled with some natural advantages such as an abundance of pure water and high quality peat, leaves growers in Northern Ireland well placed to take advantage of these opportunities.