

A Personal Response to the Changing U.K. Market for Hardy Nursery Stock[©]

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INTRODUCTION

The market for nursery stock has always changed and will continue to change but modern market conditions mean the rate of change is faster than it has been historically. It is important never to be tempted to think that you have a steady situation, as the moment you take your eyes off the ball then you have the potential to start hitting problems – change is what happens to your business when you are doing nothing.

The external changes that affect nursery businesses include those to the climate and weather, to legislation, and to the economy, and our customers. It is not always possible to predict how any of these elements will change but it is vital to keep yourself continually informed about their current state. I have never known plants to struggle to grow, and the market to struggle for sales as they have done during 2012. The best thing this year was to keep informed and to be able to react quickly to a changing situation, rather than try to predict how things would turn out.

A decade or so ago, it was possible to tell what would sell in the coming season based on what sold last year, but those days have gone. Just because you sold a certain quantity of a plant this year you won't necessarily sell them in the same numbers, or even at all, next year.

CHANGE IN THE AMENITY MARKET

There are fewer suppliers in the amenity market than a decade ago as many nurseries which once supplied both the amenity and retail sectors have become increasingly specialised as suppliers to the retail trade. These are now very firmly two distinct markets.

However, the retail sector is the one that has by far the greatest influence on the nursery trade as a whole and a huge influence on plant production both in terms of what is grown and when. Retail buyers demand volume lines from production nurseries, which have had to become specialists in growing to the specifications and schedules needed by the retail market.

However this means the amenity plant buyer – landscapers and garden designers – find it more difficult to buy plants out of the retail season.

I run a cash and carry nursery and my landscape and garden designer customers want plants such as *Lamprocapnos spectabilis* (syn. *Dicentra spectabilis*) 12 months of the year. However, we can only source them from nurseries for the half of the year when they are in season in the retail trade. The same applies to most of the plants we sell. For example, we supply more rhododendrons out of season – i.e., out of flower – than during the spring; yet the retail trade has influenced production such that most nurseries schedule for spring sales.

The outcome is that it is proving hard to get continuity of supply because of the influence of retail seasons on nursery production schedules, with many nurseries producing blocks of product for specific retail market windows.

This can't be a unique problem to my own situation. There are now huge numbers of garden designers and landscapers supplying domestic and smaller commercial markets and they require a huge range of plants in not insignificant quantities.

The other aspect of the influence of the retail sector is the demand for novelty. There is a huge appetite in the retail market for new plants but all these have been bred or selected for very specific qualities. They have to look good for some part of the 5-6 month retail sales window, but what happens for the rest of the year? Very few have good winter appeal because no one buys plants from a garden centre in winter. On top of that, they all have to be 13-14 cm tall plants that fit well on a Danish trolley so you have no bigger

plants that would look well in a garden.

THE FUTURE

Amenity cash and carry customers are bringing a higher demand for “retail quality” plants and they are willing to pay for them. They are demanding a greater range of species, sizes, and shapes – but it seems no one is promoting or marketing plants to them. I believe this has created a gap in the market: in retail you have thousands of customers each buying one plant, but in the amenity market you could have just one customer buying 50 or 100 or maybe thousands of a plant which makes promotion very cost effective.

These customers do need service. Even landscapers and garden designers need professional help to choose a plant that will work in a particular situation. It’s about building trust between supplier and customer.

We have to do more to promote plants as they are the product that will make or break us as individual businesses and as an industry but we often forget, as nurserymen, how good particular plants are and how to sell the benefits of what they will do.

As traders, cash and carry nurseries can’t be cheapest so must add value by offering expertise to customers, so we need knowledgeable staff and be prepared to pay for them. The quality of the plant comes first, quality of nursery staff is next, and it is short sighted to cut back on that. If your tractor breaks you see it instantly but it is less easy to identify things that are broken in the way we do our marketing and that is why we tend to flog old ideas. We like to get our hands dirty with the plants but never give enough time to step back and look at other aspects such as marketing – but that is paramount.