

G.B&I. Region Seminar Series

Two concurrent discussion groups considered the topics of: (1) Propagation, and (2) Training. These seminars aimed to pool current knowledge on the topic. The session on "Propagation" revolved around the concept of Total Quality Management. The aim of the "Training" session focussed on the most appropriate types of training, and the amount of time and effort to put in.

The significant conclusions developed by these groups are given in the papers that follow.

Propagation

Maurice Barletta, Reporter

Grodania A/S, Shopwhyke Road, Chichester PO20 6GD

Propagation and Quality

Discussion began with the concept of Total Quality Management (TQM), and how the propagation unit of a nursery could fit in with this. The point was made that propagation was the starting point for quality production in all the subsequent stages on the nursery.

This was considered a difficult ideal to achieve if the nursery was not large enough to support a full time propagator. On small nurseries, propagation itself is just one aspect of the propagator's job. Activities further down the production process, such as potting up liners for sale to generate cash flow, tend to push propagation down the priority list.

Propagation and Marketing

The development of more active marketing in the nursery trade can also lead to conflict, as the sales departments may demand particular plants at a time that does not fit in well with propagation. Outside this time, the propagator is faced with taking more cuttings to cover losses and fill the salesman's requirements.

It was generally agreed that the demands from the marketing men did not take account of the lag time between propagation and saleable plants. The biggest problem facing the propagator is not how to propagate, but what to root and when. A comment, based on experience in the large numbers business of micropropagation, suggested that the key to success was good planning and control. Weekly production is scheduled more than 12 months in advance.

It was suggested that a better understanding of propagation by the sales team would save costs, reduce propagator stress and avoid customer disappointment. Propagators welcomed the fact that propagation is more market orientated because they felt a more valued part of the nursery team, less isolated from the business as a whole. One idea was to redefine the propagator's job, from "one who puts roots on plants" to "one who produces young plants"—this would give greater satisfaction and a greater appreciation of the propagator's role in overall plant quality.

Irish nursery stock producers reported that the trend was away from on-nursery propagation towards buying-in liners for growing-on. But this has limited the container trade to producing only what is available from liner growers and has led to little differentiation between the ranges offered by nurseries. Nurseries are beginning to take on the propagation role once again so that they can each offer their own unique lines. Liner growers, it was suggested, should develop much closer links with their immediate customers and with end buyers.

Information and Education

Lack of information on developments in propagation techniques was identified as a problem now that a free flow of information from Government advisors and experimental stations had stopped. Personal contacts, trade press and, of course I P.P.S. meetings were chief sources of information. It was pointed out that more use could be made of the UK supply trade, as well as looking at the activities of other sectors of horticulture.

Even so there was considered to be a skills gap in basic propagation techniques such as budding and grafting. It was suggested that the education service could steer students with a natural awareness of plants towards nursery stock, although the point was made that too heavy a hand on the steering wheel could result in a rejection of the sector by those being steered.

Training

Spence Gunn, Reporter

I P P S GB&I Regional Editor

The group decided early on that training was a vital element of nursery management. Discussion focussed on the most appropriate types of training, and the amount of time and effort to put in.

Smaller nurseries in particular found that while they identified a need for training, it was difficult to allocate sufficient time. Training often conflicted with the demands of production and for this reason it was considered that, ideally, one person should be given responsibility for training, fulfilling the role of training or personnel officer—although it was recognised this person may have other duties too.

Induction training, when people first join a nursery, was seen as vital. To give sufficient attention to induction training, nurseries should avoid taking on new staff during busy periods. Working longer hours with existing staff was thought to be preferable. Recruitment should be planned so that new staff were taken on when there was sufficient time for induction training.

It is also important to plan training and staff development so that each person on the nursery had a training programme relevant to their needs and the needs of the employer.

Some of the problems can be overcome by forming, or joining, local training groups. These can help substitute for the management layers missing from small nurseries.