

7. Whalley, J. 1967. Rooting rhododendron in plastic bands. *Proc. Int Plant Prop. Soc* 17; p. 173-175
Yearbooks of the Proefstation voor de Boomkwekerij at Boskoop 1967-1973

Discussion

An enquiry from Peter Brazier on the availability of information regarding rhododendron species elicited the response that the Experimental Station had included some species in their trials and results could be obtained by a written request to the Director.

Discussion also revealed that it was the practice to take cuttings from both flushes of growth during the season without any apparent differences in response.

Although considerable discussion revolved around the concentrations of IBA employed and its placement, no conclusion was determined.

THE ROLE OF THE PLANT PROPAGATOR IN THE AMERICAN MAIL-ORDER COMMUNITY

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The topic at hand is a fascinating one and I suppose plant propagators do not vary in their daily activities a great deal in most of the nursery community enterprises. Mail-order is somewhat different in that most mail-order propagators are requested to supply a range of plant material from houseplants through all the woody ornamentals indigenous either to their geographic location, or to a profit and loss statement in a mail-order catalog. Mail-order, be it nursery stock or any other commodity, is a game of arithmetic. The only interest is, of course, complete customer satisfaction, which is the only way you can obtain a reasonable profit on a fantastic advertising investment. There are nursery mail-order concerns throughout the world whose advertising percentage costs will range from 30 to 55% of their sales dollar. Those of us in a wholesale growing operation, or a garden center endeavor could, of course, not live with this horrendous advertising cost.

I will have to limit my remarks primarily to my own company — Spring Hill Nurseries, Tipp City, Ohio because, naturally, this

is the company with which I am most familiar. My remarks will not pertain to the propagator growing a specialty crop, be it roses, herbs, etc., but rather a propagator who is growing a wide range of plant material, dictated entirely by those items that are going to be featured in the present or upcoming mail-order promotions. A propagator in such an enterprise must be well-versed in virtually all phases of propagation, which we will touch on a bit later and, probably equally as important, he must be a very astute businessman. In most cases, he is operating on a rather rigid budget and he must be able to utilize the fullest effort from his labor market. He also must be a very careful buyer pertaining to supplies and knowing when, and how many, to buy is equally as important as growing a good crop.

In regard to the various facets of propagation, in our particular case seedling propagation is probably more important than the other types of propagation. In our nursery we are seeding directly into plant pots on benches, as well as drilling seed in field seed beds. There is also a modest amount of broadcast sowing in seed beds which are, of course, maintained entirely by hand. The direct sowing into pots is relatively new, and certainly has been a panacea in the production of plants difficult to transplant. Another factor which enters into direct sowing is the statement I alluded to earlier in customer satisfaction. Perennials across the board from *Allysum* to *Yucca* are a very important segment of our sales dollar. We are endeavoring to strive for 100% perennial production in pots so that we can ship in late February to our southern customers a green-topped perennial which will give much more satisfaction than a dormant division or clump. We have also found that direct sowing, from a cost standpoint, is much more economical in most cases than drilling in seed rows. The factor that enters into this is, of course, weeding and other field cultural techniques. We can also turn a sales dollar faster with a direct-sown perennial than a field-grown seedling. In addition to perennial sowing, most of the woody ornamentals which we seed propagate, are also handled as the field-drilled perennials — drilled with a Planet Junior Seeder then grown two years prior to transplanting. The propagator, then, must be well-versed in seed dormancy, techniques of seed stratification, and must, of course, have a reliable, dependable seed source. In our case, we are purchasing seed not only in the United States, but from several seedsmen in Europe and one or two in Asia. We also maintain seed rows on the nursery of particular species. This indeed is very handy and neat, particularly in the case of some *Viburnum* cultivars, where the seeds can be picked half-ripe and sown the same day they are picked thus eliminating stratification or maintaining the seed bed an extra

year. Two days before we left the States I sowed *Viburnum plicatum* 'Maresii' (*V. tomentosum* 'Maresii') and, if past results run true, we should have seed germinating by next spring.

In discussing asexual propagation, softwood cuttings, in our particular company, would be the second most important propagation technique. Our softwood cuttings are propagated under intermittent mist and have been for quite a few years. There is nothing unique about our particular mist propagation facilities, but we are doing a reasonably good job in coming up with good stands and being able to over-winter the plants. At present our softwood cutting program consists of about a 1/2 million cuttings taken from early May and terminating in mid-August. Over the years we have learned that cuttings of some species are easily rooted, but it's quite difficult, if not almost impossible, to over-winter them. We are presently trying to consolidate those difficult to over-winter varieties in one series of beds, so that we can place the hoops over the beds and cover them with polyethylene for winter protection. We have also been pleasantly surprised with lilac cultivars left two years in the mist bed and sold as a 9-12 inch well-rooted cutting in the mail-order catalog. Of course, in most cases, the majority of mist cuttings are rooted in the summer, over-wintered, and then transplanted the following spring directly into the field with the typical nursery transplanter. The winter hardwood program consists primarily of conifers. We have a production of about 180,000 conifer cuttings in one greenhouse.

In our nursery, all of the propagating work is not handled by our propagator, Mr. Andrew Brumbaugh. Although he is in complete charge of the greenhouses and maintains a staff of approximately 30 people year-round, there are other propagating activities which are assigned to other members of the nursery. For example, Mr. Phillips, our storage foreman, handles all of the summer budding we do in the field, which incidentally is all on piece-work, and Mr. Powell, our balling foreman, is in charge of apple and lilac bench grafting in the winter. I have the responsibility of all field seeding through drilling and a modest amount of direct broadcast sowing of new plant cultivars we are experimenting with — primarily for the purpose of evaluation. The reason I mention this is that I think it is extremely important in a company of our size to have close liaison among staff members of the entire nursery. This has worked out quite well for us with no "jealousy" or petty bickering; the cooperation among all concerned is admirable. In discussing grafting, we do a very modest amount of spruce grafting of some of the species, and this is under the direction of Mr. Brumbaugh.

The present era has been labeled by some as the age of the computer, and I would most certainly concur with this philosophy

of thinking. The computer at our nursery has been of great assistance to most of us and certainly is beneficial to our plant propagator. By looking at the weekly sales analysis reports, he is able to evaluate the projected sales of any given plant in the catalog, and can immediately check back against last year's sales, as well as the inventory on hand. All of this data, plus other information, is on one sheet of paper which gives him great assistance in planning and programming. Planning and programming of plant propagation is equally important, in my opinion, to the production and the actual growing of the crop.

I should like to direct a few remarks to the Junior Members of the I.P.P.S. I note with great interest and delight that 18% of the GB & I Region consists of Junior Membership. To those Junior Members in the audience, as you move through the nursery community in your life span, you will probably make one or several job changes. I personally see nothing wrong with this since one's ambition in life is to reward your talents with enthusiasm and, of course, the remuneration is part of the overall package. If you would permit some advice, as you interview for a job change, I think there are several salient points that should be discussed with your prospective employer. First and foremost, is of course, the business philosophy of the company to which you are applying. This is extremely important from a plant propagator's standpoint since you must know what type of plant material you are going to be asked to produce and the existent philosophy of the company naturally goes hand-in-hand with your production. At the same time, I think it would be wise to explore the possibility of a conceivable change in business philosophy in the immediate future. For example, if you are interviewing with a prospective employer who presently is doing the bulk of his business through garden center and landscape endeavors, you will be producing an altogether different plant than a mail-order nursery. This is an item that is very rarely discussed and the questions that you ask in this broad area deserve an answer. Secondly, it is expected of you, and you are entitled to know, the profit and loss statements for the existent year and perhaps a year or two back. There may be some reluctance to disclose figures, but if you have applied for a position and are seriously considering joining a management staff, you should be entitled to see this information, and at the same time, be a gentleman to consider it privileged information in that it should not leave the room with you. And lastly, of course, the facilities in which you will be working and the problem, if you will, of existent employees who will be under your direction. Sometimes this can present a major problem, and it is not unusual for some friction and, in isolated cases, the dismissal of an employee who absolutely will not cooperate with your own ideologies and concepts of work performance. In my experience, this has been quite overrated, and I

do believe that anyone joining a new company can perhaps adapt and, if the situation is intolerable with an isolated person or two, then it is to the betterment of all to dismiss the problem. The reason I mention this in this presentation is that we very rarely discuss job opportunities or the problems and situations that do arise when one wishes to move to a new company I think quite often both management and the prospective employee act too hastily and we do not deliberate over the aspects of many things that will make life much more tolerable for all concerned I personally delight in companies who are strongly departmentalized and allowing the various department heads some responsibility as far as hiring employees, purchasing, etc The challenge is much greater and most well-knit companies who operate in this tenor also have well-scheduled staff meetings so that each department is working cohesively with the adjacent department and therefore, we have harmony rather than discord

The nursery community, whether it be in Great Britain or the United States, is a fascinating and challenging industry.

Someone said once that nothing comes easy, and I suppose this is true, but I do believe that the challenges that a propagator encounters in a mail-order endeavor are perhaps larger than in any other facet of the nursery community. As I mentioned earlier, rather than the mere production of a wide range of plants, one factor that certainly keeps an active mind more active, is, of course, diversification. Believe me, if you consider propagating for a mail-order nursery, you will encounter this attractive stimulating activity.

The closest that the United States has ever come to a poet laureate was a gentleman by the name of Robert Frost. Mr. Frost, along with Mr. Thoreau and several other gentlemen are favorites of mine, and I think of all the words that Frost wrote — the one verse that sticks firmly in my mind goes as follows:

“The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
And I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.”

I think that we could paraphrase Mr. Frost's words to that of a propagator, *per se*: We all have miles to go before we experience the same activity twice and before we can actually assure ourselves that we have solved a knotty problem that might arise. I think many of us have been in the situation that I found myself in. After spending five years in the nursery community, I knew all the answers to all the questions! Now after 26 years in the community, I become more impressed each day with my own ignorance. We are in the most challenging, the most dynamic, the

most gratifying profession that anyone could be engaged. Each of us has an obligation to ourselves to contribute to this quite honourable profession. When we are sowing seed — taking cuttings — grafting — we are doing just that! I have made the comment that I would not trade my profession with any nuclear physicist or any other profession in the world, and I mean that. I am pleased, honoured, and proud to be an integral part of the nursery community. The International Plant Propagators' Society is the cohesiveness that we as propagators need, and this is why we revere our Society as we do. My last word . . . much success, much happiness, much peace. May God walk at your right hand today — tomorrow — forever.