

PROPAGATION THROUGH TO PROMOTION—AN ENGLISH NURSERYMAN'S VIEW

MICHAEL L. DUNNETT

Blakedown Nurseries Ltd.

*Belbroughton Road, Blakedown, Kidderminster
Worcestershire, DY10 3JG, England*

Why propagate? An obvious question, but apart from the obvious answer, to reproduce plants, why do we take cuttings, make grafts, and sow seeds. Well, if you are an amateur, you do it most probably for interest. If you are a professional do you do it for interest? It may be an interesting craft but it is not just interest that engages hundreds of people in a full time occupation from which they earn their livelihood. The reason, of course, is that plants are propagated commercially which when grown into larger plants are sold to the general public. These people buy plants because they either don't have the time or skill or the interest to grow plants from a seed or a cutting and yet for various social and economic reasons they wish to have plants around them.

How long we have been reproducing plants? Man has been propagating plants which have fed him for many thousands of years. At first these were from seeds but as civilization became more sophisticated then propagation by vegetative means was undertaken. Firstly, mainly for plants such as herbs which had curative properties.

Later, and certainly it has been recorded in the fourteenth and fifteenth century in the U.K., plants were propagated for use as ornamentals. Many of the plants which we currently grow in the U.K. were collected by the great plant collectors in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and, therefore, have been propagated for well over a hundred years.

There has been, of course, a certain amount of selection, particularly in woody ornamentals, undertaken by various people from the landed gentry to commercial plantmen—who have selected a better flowering form or a weeping form, or a form that colours better in the autumn, or a type that is dwarfer, and so on. This, of course, still happens today.

It is interesting, I think, to compare the development of the product, for that is what it is, which we produce compared with other like products. You will be hard pressed to even think of any other commodity that was being manufactured 100 years ago that bears any resemblance today to its original concept. Virtually everything you can think of will have been modified or adjusted, improved, or adapted to meet a change in the market place. Many products have been completely redesigned; in fact there has been an evolution process going on in most products that we find in today's market place.

As nurserymen we still sell plants such as *Acer saccharinum* (the sugar maple) which was introduced from Eastern United States into the United Kingdom in 1725; *Tilia × euchlora*, a much planted and excellent amenity tree, was first recorded in cultivation in the U.K. in 1860. Lavender was first brought from the Mediterranean to the U.K. in the 1600's. We have, in fact, been extremely fortunate that the product which we manufacture has stood the test of time for so long. In fairness there are, of course, some genera which have been extensively redeveloped by hybridization, such as camellias and roses.

In the production of ornamental plants we have seen enormous changes and improvements in the last twenty years. We have also seen the advent of the garden centre, which compared to two decades ago, has brought about a dramatic change in the retailing of plants. There is no doubt that the garden centre and the production of plants in containers has in the U.K. helped to ensure a prosperous business environment for many nurserymen. But will this continue if we accept that everything in commerce is changing, which is fact—as can be seen from looking at any history book? Then surely we should ask ourselves how these changes are likely to effect us and what should we do about them?

Firstly, let us ask ourselves in what part of the market place we are in. It is essential to clearly establish this. I believe it is now recognised that the ornamental plant is considered a product supplied to the leisure market. So what is this leisure market? Is it possible to define? What are the competitors to our product within the leisure market. As I understand it, leisure can be any activity which people undertake at a time they are not working. This is a vast range. It is also a multi-million pound industry: many of the manufacturers and suppliers have many more pounds to spend on letting the general public know about the product they manufacture than we have.

We do, of course, have some outstanding attributes to our products that other leisure products do not have. For example, we have a living product which generally improves with age. We have a product that lasts a long time. We have a product that improves the environment in which we live. We have a product which harms no one. We have a product that has a multitude of different natural forms. If we have such a marvellous product should we be concerned? Surely people will carry on buying our products for ever and ever. How can they not do so, we may ask if it has so many positive qualities.

It is not that simple. Firstly, we have to examine where, and how the product is used. You don't buy a tennis racquet or a set of golf clubs to look at, you buy them to use in a leisure activity. Plants are broadly the same. We must put them into context—hardy outdoor plants are bought to support a pastime. At this time we are

talking about gardening. So we must examine the pastime, compare it in all aspects to other pastimes in which the general public is involved. The product has a lot going for it, but has the pastime? Like so many other things, a great deal depends from which angle you view it, your own personal interests and aspirations, and to some extent what you want to see. To some, gardening will appear boring or frustrating and to others interesting and satisfying. Others will look on the physical aspects of gardening as healthy and good exercise while others will view the same physical content as just plain hard work that must be avoided at all costs. We must also consider fashion and ask ourselves is gardening a fashionable pastime. It has been a hobby for a long, long time. Is it still fashionable as one of the new pastimes, or is it out of fashion? Does it, as an activity, offer what people want as a leisure activity in the 1990's?

Recent market research in the U.K. has clearly indicated that the British attitude to gardening has changed. Nearly 50% of the population said they would prefer to spend their money on other leisure activities.

This attitude was most strongly held by those in the population with the highest disposable income—the under 45's age group. So what is to be done—do we let the product which we propagate and grow, and from which we all earn our livelihood, rest on its undoubted laurels? If we do, we stand the risk that other leisure pursuits could gain even more of our market share. There is now more choice available in leisure activities, irrespective of income or class than at any other time. The leisure industry, which is increasing in size and variety each year is a multi-million pound industry, with a multitude of activities many of which are manufactured, backed and supplied to the public by international companies.

In my opinion there is no choice. We have to adopt the same techniques as our competitors in the leisure industry and "Promote our Product". If we don't, then it is certain that we shall see our market slip away from us.

We now must address ourselves to two other questions: *What and How?* Firstly, what do we promote? There are two: (1) the Product: plants; and (2) the Hobby: gardening. They can and should be promoted and marketed both independently and together. How? In every conceivable way, at every conceivable time by as many people and by as many organisations as is possible. There are hundreds of ways in which gardening and plants can be promoted. Some, of course, can and will be expensive, for example television and press advertising. Many others can be undertaken with a far less ambitious budget. Others, like an enthusiastic conversation with your customer, costs nothing.

Let us now look at some specific ways in which we can retain and increase our market share. Don't keep relying on the odd

favourites. As I have stated earlier many of our products are now up to 100 years old. How much longer will they continue to sell?

Consider packing and presenting the old favourites in new ways to give sparkle.

Exploit the nostalgia which surrounds some of these old and loved plants. Look at ways in which you are not only attracting the captive customer but the potential customer—new gardeners, such as first time house buyers, even schoolchildren; one day they will, if attracted to gardening, also be good customers.

Support, in all possible ways, the T.V. producers and the gardening journalists; send them interesting facts and figures about you and the plants you grow and the industry of which we are part of. Whether a wholesaler or retailer, consider spending a greater percentage of your turnover on selling your product to the end consumer.

Support generic promotion campaigns—The “Autumn Nature’s Natural Time for Planting”, which started in the UK in 1986 has not in three seasons changed the buying habits of gardeners. It has, however, started to alert a whole generation of young gardeners to the fact that you can plant in autumn as well as the spring.

Look for, and if you can find them—promote new plants to the best of your ability, or find someone who has the interest and resources to do so. Above all, be committed and enthusiastic to the industry that gives you your livelihood.