

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

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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.

The cost of Training

The comment was made that some nurseries put a lot of resources into training staff who then leave. The group drew the distinction between those who leave for other horticultural jobs and those who leave the industry completely. In the former instance, training was still considered worthwhile, because the trained person was a net gain to the industry. The individual nursery was equally likely to benefit by recruiting someone else's trained person. Movement within the industry was considered generally beneficial because it increased the experience of the workforce.

Effort should be put into preventing trained people leaving horticulture. ATB (Agricultural Training Board) forklift training courses were a particular problem because trainees could obtain a certificate then leave for higher paid jobs in other industries where they could use their skills. Ideally this should be avoided by greater attention to initial recruitment. Employers could also consider contracts which specified a minimum period of employment following such training.

Training Groups

The problem of finding resources (time, money, the right staff) for training are greatest for small nurseries.

Some nurserymen expressed the fear that poor quality college training was leading to a shortage of skilled people for the industry. It was all very well for colleges to further a student's education, but should it be the industry's role to provide all the training in practical skills?

Widening Experience

Managers expressed a need for greater help, perhaps from training groups, on how to train. Looking at practices in other industries was considered a good idea. It was suggested that perhaps the next I.P.P.S. regional conference could include a visit to an airport or factory with a view to learning from their manager's experiences.