

Crop Scheduling: A Business Practice or a Customer Service?

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To many of us crop scheduling means rotation between a wheat crop, a lucerne hay crop, a barley crop, or something of that nature. In reality it just means planned and/or organised production of your crop.

You are probably aware that in most businesses, whether they are producing nuts, bolts, cars, or aeroplanes, the production is done according to schedule. They work to a plan i.e., a certain number of a certain product is produced at a predetermined time of the year. If you produce suntan lotion then your production is greater just prior to summer. Well, plants are no different—their production also has to be preplanned.

I'll digress a little bit here and talk about customers. One of the current buzz words, favoured by business consultants and financial advisers, is "trading partners." The trading partners are a pair or a set of businesses whose success, productivity, and profit depends on each other. It basically means you the seller depend on your buyer's successful business for your business to be successful and conversely for them to be successful they require you to be successful and have a good efficient business. If you take this to its logical conclusion or to its nth degree, trading partners are not just two businesses. They are a chain, much like in a food chain. In our business there is a primary producer (the plant propagator), a wholesale nursery, a retail nursery, and the end user or consumer—the gardening public.

Now its not hard to see that if the gardening public is happy with the plant then the propagator benefits. This can be illustrated as follows: *Ceanothus papillosus* var. *roweanus* 'Blue Pacific' is an attractive green shrub with prolific blue flowers in spring. At the right time of year it is an extremely eye catching plant. If the plant is potted up too early or held too long in a pot, the dark green lustre of the leaves goes and you are left with a yellow tinge and a leggy sparse plant which is not only very unattractive but is actually very hard to sell. So lets take the case of Mr. & Mrs. Joe Bloggs who walk into Fred Smith's retail garden centre. They don't know what they want to buy and in fact they may not even have in mind a particular spot in the garden. They see a group of 20 or 30 *Ceanothus* 'Blue Pacific' all in full flower—a magnificent sight—and they buy one. During the day a whole group of Mr. & Mrs. Bloggs come and buy all the *Ceanothus* 'Blue Pacific'.

In one Saturday morning the retailer sells his entire stock of 30 *Ceanothus* 'Blue Pacific' and so on Monday morning he is on the phone to his wholesale supplier saying: "Those *Ceanothus* 'Blue Pacific' you delivered on Friday were great, they're all gone. I'll have another 50 of them next Friday, thanks."

He receives these plants on Friday and once again they have all gone by lunch time on Saturday—that's what business is about, buying and selling plants, turning them over quickly and efficiently. He is happy and so is the wholesaler, who has just sold another 50 plants, which in these hard times is a good sale.

The wholesaler is feeling pleased with himself. The *Ceanothus* tubes were only bought in April. A 5-month turn around over winter is pretty good. In fact he

probably couldn't have grown them on any quicker and still had them up to size and looking good. So he looks back in his records to find out from whom and when he bought them. He then rings Mr. & Mrs. Jones Propagation Nursery and orders another 1000 for the following April.

So what we have got here is a happy consumer, a happy retailer, a happy wholesaler, and a happy propagator. This is where crop scheduling comes in. Mr. Jim Jones now has an order for 1,000 *Ceanothus* that have to be ready for April. So he looks back in his books and sees that in the previous year he propagated those in December. He then opens his diary to October (or notes on his computerised production schedule) and inserts a reminder to cut back and fertilize the mother stock plants to stimulate growth so they can be cut in December and ready for tubing in February. By April they will be ready for sale to the wholesaler who can then grow them on to sell in September.

In essence the above sequence is what crop scheduling is all about—getting your plants propagated and potted up at the right time so they can be ready for selling in their peak selling condition or when they are wanted. This doesn't sound too difficult, and isn't, when dealing with only one or two taxa. Where it becomes complicated is when you have a broad range of plants. If you have 1000 taxa, crop scheduling not only becomes harder but it also becomes more than just a matter of customer service.

To do crop scheduling efficiently you need detailed, accurate knowledge of the plant and its growth habits, your customer, their customers, your business, and your production methods. All of these are necessary for successful crop scheduling and business management. To do those things efficiently requires records—accurate detailed records on everything you do, from propagation to sale. It also really requires that you go out and talk with your customers—not just send them a list every month, take an order by fax, send them the plants, post them the bill, and take the cheque. That is not really doing business; it is just paper shuffling.

Many of you probably go to a variety of different seminars during the year and just about every seminar has someone talking on business practices, business trends, how to make your business more efficient, etc. At the ones I've been to, two things come through strongly: the first is customer service and the second is information technology. These two areas are what I believe are the most important aspects of business management. They are also the fundamentals of crop scheduling.

With crop scheduling what you are aiming to do is have your plant ready when it is wanted by your customer. This may not sound too profound but for many years the attitude in our industry seems to have been: you will have it when it is ready. With some plants it is a simple procedure to have a plant ready at any given time. It only requires some basic knowledge: when it is wanted, percentage strike rate, time to put on roots, and time to fill the pot. With this information you can calculate when to propagate and how many in excess of what is ordered. You have got to make allowances for external factors, such as the weather. Some people work on a variance of a month either side, others on two weeks either side. I have actually come across some customers who specify the day they want their plants delivered. Even though this level of accuracy is generally for accounting purposes rather than for growing purposes, it does give some idea of how organised some nurseries are. These are the ones you have to cater for because they are the nurseries that are going to be successful, and most likely able to weather the hard times.

However, there are some plants that have a very narrow window for propagation. This can be due to a plant's physiology or perhaps there have to be certain weather conditions. A classic example is *Daphne odora*. The old story is that it should be propagated on Boxing Day, with the tubes generally being ready in late April. This is a problem for customers who want their tubes in January so that they can get some growth on before the winter cold sets in. What the propagator needs to do is to let the customer know that the best time for daphnes is April. If the customer still wants them in January he may have to pay more and they may be slightly overgrown. Another choice is a compromise. The customer may be able to take them in September, after the cold of winter has passed. Whatever happens, the propagator should make it the customer's choice. Too often the propagator tells the wholesaler that the plants will be available in April, take it or leave it.

Currently, there are a large number of newcomers in the nursery industry. There are also many nurseries trying new plants. Therefore, I often find that I also have to do a degree of crop scheduling on behalf of my customers. This gets back to my earlier reference to trading partners. It is no good if my customer buys my tubes at a time when they will either die or not be ready for sale when the public wants them. If they do this too often they will go out of business and I will have lost a customer.

So far I have only talked about crop scheduling for the purpose of customer satisfaction. Efficient business procedure is another reason for crop scheduling. There are many propagators who seem never to plan—they just propagate what they think of each day. If you only have a small facility or only do a limited range this method will suffice. If your range is extensive and you do not have a good schedule you will soon find your production in a mess—I speak from experience—and many customers missing out on their orders. You will also find yourself with excess tubes or plants that may have to be disposed of.

Planning for business efficiency involves working out the practicalities. You don't want to get to the stage where your tubers have no work to do, or where there is far too much tubing. It is a matter of mixing slow-striking species with quick-striking ones. Another point to consider is that of propagating difficulty. Our staff are paid a bonus based on production rates. They get a bit upset if they get all hard-to-propagate or unpleasant plants, or if they get lots of small runs. So we plan each week in consultation with one staff member and create an even mix of short and long runs, and easy and difficult plants.

In summary, crop scheduling is a complicated process, although it is not one that requires vast amounts of expertise or intelligence. To do it successfully all that is needed is the desire and information. Information on:

- The plants: strike rates, rooting time, growth rates, flowering time, etc.
- The customer: their customers, growing methods, e.g., machine or hand pot, their general weather patterns, etc.
- Sales: when and how many of each plant, forward orders, etc.
- Production: your staff, your own weather patterns, staff holidays, training, etc.

Finally I urge everyone to try and preschedule their plant production. Don't be discouraged if it doesn't seem to work the first time. It is a continual learning process and no two years will be the same.