

# **The Latest Environmental Restrictions on Nursery Production in Germany: Is Nursery Production Still Possible?**

**Jan-Dieter Bruns**

Joh. Bruns, Dunfische Export Baumschulen, Eyhauser Allee 12, D-2903, Bad Zwischenahn, Germany

## **INTRODUCTION**

In Germany there are approximately 4000 nursery companies; 1500 of them are members of the Federation Bund Deutscher Baumschulen or BdB. The total area in production is approximately 25,000 ha. The production volume is worth 1.5 billion marks (1994), making Germany the biggest producer of nursery stock in Europe. Production is scattered throughout the country but there are three centres.

- 1) The district of Pinneberg in Hamburg, with 300 nurseries and 2200 ha of land.
- 2) The Ammerland, also with about 300 nurseries and more than 2000 ha of land.
- 3) The Rheinland, with 150 nurseries and 1300 ha of land.

In these three areas some 50% of the total plant production in Germany is concentrated. This is partly a result of very long nursery tradition but mainly because of the perfect climate and the excellent soil. It is primarily in these areas with highly concentrated nursery production that we are having most of the problems with environmental restrictions.

## **ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY IN GERMANY**

Environmentalism started in Germany 15 to 20 years ago. Initially the main concern was the safety of atomic power stations. So a new party was founded which was named in Germany "Die Grünen", the Green Party. They receive between 5% and 10% of the votes. The Green Party pointed out the risks and problems with not only atomic power stations but also with industrial production.

This party or a similar party now exists all over Europe. In the beginning and still today the nursery industry benefits, from the fact that the environmental party is making people more aware of nature, green issues, and of course plants.

Not only private people but also politicians of the other democratic parties in Germany became more aware of the environmental idea. This helped us to sell more plants to local authorities for street planting or reconstruction of city centres, and industrial projects have also been well supplied with plantings. Banks, insurance companies, and other private investors, and also private homes, are paying more attention to their landscaping.

This gave a big push to the whole industry not only for the nurseries but also for landscape architects and landscape contractors. More and more universities offered courses of study in environmental and landscaping studies. The landscape architecture curriculum became more fashionable and was in as much demand as, for example, medicine. Today landscape architects are working for landscape architect offices, for local authorities, and local or state government. There is no doubt that environmentalism helped to increase nursery sales in Germany by bringing more people's attention to their natural surroundings.

But today environmentalism is also causing us problems because over-reaction has resulted in government-imposed environmental restrictions. A lot of the people developing and administering policy only have a theoretical background but are supported by some of the politicians.

## **EFFECT OF ENVIRONMENTAL RESTRICTIONS ON GERMAN NURSERY STOCK PRODUCTION**

**Field Production.** Field production accounts for 80% of production in Germany. It is endangered by environmental policy on water quality, peat conservation, and landscape protection.

Over the last few years large amounts of land have been declared water conservation areas with such strict laws governing the use of pesticides and fungicides that it is hardly worthwhile planting there at all. There are water conservation areas in the Pinneberg area north of Hamburg and they cover large areas for the water supply of the city of Hamburg. There are also water conservation areas in Oldenburg which have expanded over the last few years.

Peat protection areas exist in Oldenburg which protect 28,000 ha of peat. The environmental regulation programme which is coming out this year will cover another 70,000 ha. We have to expect that in all the peat areas, some of them used for decades for intensive agricultural production, restrictions will be enforced. These restrictions endanger, in the area of Bad Zwischenahn and Edewecht, alone, 16 nurseries with 1000 ha of production and 1200 employees.

During discussions between the Home Office Minister for Lower Saxony and the German nursery association of Weser-Ems, an agreement was reached stating that areas already existing in nursery production can continue to produce in the future, but there will be no possibility of expanding these areas.

Landscape protection schemes have also been established by the authorities. The scheme set up for the Ammerland region, for example, asks for necessary steps to develop and conserve protection-worthy areas as follows:

- Removal of unnatural or non-indigenous plant material.
- Revert arable land and nursery land to permanent pasture.
- Prohibit "antisocial" plant material.
- Reinstate natural bog land.
- Raise the natural water table by filling in open drainage ditches

In the future the peat-bog region will be included in these protection-worthy areas. In sensitive areas no new nursery establishments may be founded or expanded.

In such areas nursery production is only possible with many restrictions, these are beginning to cover not only the use of fertilizers or pesticides but the aesthetics of the nursery layout. For example, should the trees be planted in rows or scattered about like in a park? I know one example where it was forbidden for a nursery to plant larger trees in rows on a field which was in a landscape conservation area. It was forbidden only because the district magistrate of that county had a personal dislike for the planting of trees in straight rows.

**Container Production.** Container production amounts for 20% of nursery stock production in Germany. To prepare fields for container production in Germany most of the companies are leveling the ground, putting several centimetres of sand



on top, and then covering this with a plastic sheeting plus an extra Mypex sheeting. Irrigation is by overhead sprinklers. The water is pumped out of the ground into ponds or a reservoir and from there onto the fields.

A year ago a new law was passed which states every container field has to be approved by the local government. The argument for this law is that the politicians, mostly the Green Party, are saying that container fields which are covered by a plastic layer have to be treated for planning purposes in the same way as, for example, a concrete car park.

At Bruns nursery we can still get permits to build container fields but we are having problems in sensitive areas. For example, the hard frosts mean we have to provide winter protection for our container plants and, therefore, we are using polythene tunnels or for larger plants Filclair polyhouses. These polyhouses, up to a height of 4 m, can be constructed without any permit, but I am sure that it won't be long before a new law is passed under which a permit from the government will also be required to erect them.

Our container nursery is now recycling 100% of its irrigation water. This is done at the present time without enforcement from the government, but I am also sure that legislation enforcing this will come in the future. We are using slow-release fertilizer as a top dressing and have stopped using liquid fertilizer in order to avoid high concentrations of fertilizer and chemicals accumulating in the recycled water.

We now have a new law in Germany regarding the packaging of goods which makes the producer responsible for recycling. That means we have tenders coming through local authorities in which the nursery is responsible for the collection of the empty container pot and the one-way pallets. The same problem applies also to supplying garden centers. Now there are some garden centers which are asking a percentage of the turnover for recycling costs from the nursery. The nursery supplies container plants to the garden center and the garden center sells them to its customers. The customer can bring back the empty container to the garden center and then from the garden center it is sent back to the nursery.

At the present time the pot suppliers are working on finding an organic paper or similar material for rigid containers. In my opinion these organic pots can be used for groundcovers for the landscape industry, but not for the garden center trade. *Garden center customers are still wanting a clean black rigid container which can't be made at the present time from organic materials.*

Today most of the nurseries are still using container media of 80% to 100% peat. The research station in Bad Zwischenahn and also the other research stations in Germany are working on a material to substitute for the peat in container production.

## **NURSERY INDUSTRY RESPONSE TO ENVIRONMENTAL RESTRICTIONS**

Nursery associations are employing more people to follow all the new laws and to help to find solutions during discussions with the politicians, to influence legislation before it is passed. They are also printing brochures and giving information to politicians and other interested people about environmentally friendly production methods.

The local nursery association in Oldenburg has now employed one person who spends 50% of his time dealing with the problems of environmental restrictions in our area.

At Bruns Nursery we are using almost no chemicals for weed control, using hand or mechanical weeding instead. Only in container production is chemical herbicide still used.

Bad Zwischenahn, where the nursery is located, is a large tourist area and we offer a half-day tour once every month through our nursery to show groups of 55 to 60 people that we produce our plants in an environmentally friendly way. The tour is not only frequented by the tourists but also by the local people from Bad Zwischenahn.

In these days we are not only facing the problems of plant production, making sales, and getting paid by the customer, but we also have to face new environmental restrictions and spend a lot of our time negotiating with people who mostly have only a theoretical knowledge.

But we have to face these new problems and I am confident that the German nursery production will continue to be strong and healthy.