

## Evolution of Edibles in Plant Retailing

Clive Larkman

Larkman Nurseries Pty Ltd, P.O. Box 567, Lilydale VIC 3140, Australia

[clive@larkmannurseries.com.au](mailto:clive@larkmannurseries.com.au)

*Keywords:* garden centers, food crops, marketing, edible plants, edimentals, herbs.

### INTRODUCTION

We are all here due to an involvement in an industry that goes back many thousands of years. Over that time there have been a multitude of changes in why, what, and when people buy plants. I intend to look briefly at the long-term history and how it has shifted around the demand and use of edible plants. I will then review the more recent trends over the past 50 years and how they relate to human culture, the economy and social fluctuations. Retailing is a complex subject at best and is impossibly unpredictable in edible horticulture. To set the record for this paper the class of edible plants encompasses all the plants used in the home: edible, medicinal, and fragrant.

### PLANT RETAILING

Plant retailing, like all retailing requires a group of people wanting to buy a product from a range of people wanting to sell that product. Like other key retailing sectors, plant selling is a wide ranging and stable part of the world economy. Theoretically it goes back as far as the history

of human settlement. Originally, man was a nomadic hunter gatherer, travelling the land hunting and collecting food. Over the millennia there have been a range of factors that have pushed human communities in one direction or another. The first, and greatest influence, on settlements was the cultivation of plants. Initially it was simply a matter of cultivating desirable plants and removing unwanted species. Next step was to “fence” off the area prior to actually “moving” and “planting” specific plants. The ability to cultivate plants enabled man to settle down in one spot and cease the nomadic life. At the same time, it demanded that man settled down. The nature of plant cultivation meant that humans no longer had to chase food to feed the family, but it required they stay in one place to feed the plants.

Initially plant growing was limited to farmers and men producing crops to sustain the village. They grew what was easy, what was needed and generally what was indigenous to the region. It was a simple form of horticulture that lasted for thousands of years. Over time the ability to grow a wider range of plants enabled farmers to sell to a

more diverse customer base. Individual farmers also selected better yielding forms, which created a demand for artificially propagated plants. However, the production of the plants was limited to the grower's ability to propagate from their own stock. They collected their own seed and over time developed the ability to asexually propagate their best forms. These selections demanded the highest prices and stimulated mass production. Now the ability to sell was restricted by their ability to transport the plant.

It was at this stage that the basics of plant retailing started to develop. Once a grower could select good selections and then produce a plant that replicated their characteristics, they could sell the plants as well as the produce. From this the plant retailing industry was born. At first it was the basic concept of one grower supplying another with no attempt to influence purchases through presentation (i.e., marketing). Plants were basically grown and sold for use as producers of food and ancillary products.

This was the system for hundreds of years with the only real change being when communities started to recognize layers of wealth. The evolution of classes (in all cultures) created some people with ample assets and others who struggled to survive. When combined with the new culture of land ownership the levels of wealth evolved with the ability to demonstrate this wealth through the presentation of "better ornamental" gardens. The working class had gardens (if they could afford land) which were primarily used to produce food, medicines, and home beautification (flowers, etc.) products.

The wealthy landowners had more than enough money to purchase the basic necessities of food and health plants, so they started to buy plants and to pay staff to create attractive gardens. They needed plants that were more ornamental than edible.

They also started to search for plants that were more exotic and needed growing skills. It was around 2000 years BC that the aristocracy in western Asia and eastern Europe started to develop complex and ornate gardens. As the trends moved west to Europe gardening also developed in eastern Asia where structured gardens were the mainstay. This moved through China and into Japan where highly manicured gardens representing the natural landscape were the aim.

It is hard to compare communities from Asia, Europe, Africa, the Americas, and Australasia as the records of what was grown is minimal. Also, the cultures are quite different with some attaining a high level of development and other remaining quite tribal. A wealthy lord from central Europe had quite different tastes, needs, and resources to a tribal leader from central Australia. The styles reflected much of the nature of the culture in a region and tended to be similar across the area. Over the past two centuries landscapes have devolved into a multitude of styles each with its own set of average to excellent examples. The better gardens generally had a greater range of unusual plants. As the retail sector grew so did the diversity and availability. The concept of retailing varied greatly across cultures but in most cases has evolved to the same position.

The desire to have what others do not quickly created the concept of supply- and demand-based pricing. Originally this focused on jewelry, precious stones etc. but quickly covered all aspects of human production. The wealthy would produce beautiful and exotic gardens and the working class would soon try to emulate them. New and exotic plants were the realm of the rich and the desire of the poor. In some parts of the world they even became a form of currency.

## CREATING AN INDUSTRY

Originally the producer was also the retailer, and this remained the case until the 20<sup>th</sup> century when retailing and growing became advanced and segregated. Retailing focused on presentation and range with a different set of skills to the grower. Growing required propagation skills and an understanding of what particular plants needed to maximize growth rate and improve quality. Since then the division has formalized as commercial and retail. The commercial tends to supply landscapers, farmers and retailers and the retail supplies the home gardener. When reviewing the history of gardening most research is based on the large ornamental gardens of the wealthy and the government. These are really the realm of the commercial grower. For the purpose of understanding retail, it is best to look at the small businesses supplying the home gardener. They have different needs and shop in a different way giving rise to two separate selling groups. From these developments the nursery industry arose with three sectors, growing, retailing and allied trades.

For most of the previous 5000 years it was the need to grow food/medicinal plants that drove the nursery sector. In the 1960s large supermarkets took the place of small local stores as the main supplier of food products. Until then many families relied on the “father” to grow a range of herbs, veggies, and fruit to supplement what was sold at the food retailers. Suddenly, the “mother” could buy what she needed as and when she wanted so “father’s” products weren’t needed any more.

“Father” turned his talents and spare land into ornamental gardens to improve the home. For the first time in history decorating the exterior of the home became a major industry for the masses. These new gardeners wanted rare and unusual plants as well as the common attractive varieties. They needed to find retailers selling all sorts of plants from a

wide range of growers. They wanted to have bigger, better, prettier or whatever made their friends and neighbors envious. This desire drove retail nurseries to search for more “new” and “rare” products - ornamental rather than edible/usable.

As I said above the changes in ornamental gardening has had the biggest direct effect on plant retailing. Edible plants are what bring many buyers into the nursery, but it is changes in what is “fashionable in the garden” that has kept the consumer talking about plants. We must accept that ornamental gardening is a fashion-based industry. As such it is governed by all the principles of fashion retailing. It is both predictable and unpredictable. From the outside it seems that plant selections and garden styles change at will. Strappy, perennial, bright colors structured and informal are just some of the trends over the past few decades. However, if you look at the changes and compare them with what is happening in other fashion sectors you can predict where plant styles will go.

Garden styles like other fashion items, take inspiration from all parts of life. With television and the internet so prevalent any new formats can quickly move around the world. Prior to the internet, garden styles moved around the world as designers and plant hunters travelled and brought the designs home. Now the consumer sees what they like in another country or region and then request that the designers to use it. This has resulted in rapid shifts in design and also a situation where there can be several very different styles all leading the fashion trend.

The world of edible plants is also based on fashion—the fashion of food. This is a far more recent trend and is much harder to define. In many countries food fashion has varied little in a thousand years. It is changed only with improvements in the raw food supply. In other countries, like Australia, where the population has grown through mass

immigration from other cultures, the food styles are extremely diverse and changeable.

Food fashion is still a new process and it is a little like music where a new style hits the consumer and is the “in thing” until the next style hits. Like music, as more styles develop so do the fusion styles and the tastes of the consumer. Also, as the individual matures so does their taste for different foods. This is not really surprising as both music and taste are part of our basic senses and have a strong effect on emotional stability. The way we deal with them is a key to our enjoyment of plants and food.

As an industry we are again at the mercy of what appear to be random shifts in demand. This causes excess and shortages in supply and rewards those willing to keep looking for what is new. The word “new” being very subjective as many “new” plants are very old to some cultures yet new to others (Figure 1). The winners in the new world of edible plants are those that have an understanding of edible plants as a source of food, as a part of an ornamental home garden and as status symbol in a shifting culture.



Figure 1. New is again the key but new is not new—it is just exotic. Top left to right: turmeric—*Curcuma longa*, wasabi—*Eutrema japonicum*; Bottom left to right: mushroom plant—*Rungia klossii*, yam bean—*Pachyrhizus erosus*.

In Australia and other western nations, food has become a national past time. Cooking and eating are now a social event. Gardeners have a desire to grow their own food as it gives them greater range and “cleaner” food. They can control what is used on it and are comfortable that no nasty chemicals have been used. All of a sudden, we are growing our food in our garden, we are cooking it in the garden, and we are eating it in the garden. We freely move from the house to the garden. This has brought a new generation of people into the garden and they are now looking to learn about ornamental and edible plants. They want their edible plants to look good and are looking for more of what I call “edimentals”—plants that are primarily ornamental but are also edible. We have returned to wanting edible/medicinal plants as well as ornamental ones.

Since man first started growing and retailing plants the range being produced has continued to expand. However, the greatest expansion has been in the last 150 years with the majority of the increase in the last 25 years. The development of better pots, pot media and fertilizers has helped plant growers gain the skills needed to take plants from their natural environment to the home garden. For most of the history of our industry edible plants changed slowly and the biggest shifts in plant types have been in ornamental styles.

Ornamental plants have evolved as we are able to move plants around the world and as we have improved our breeding techniques. Over the last 20 years a “new” plant or cultivar sold just because it was “new”. This trend has eased, and gardeners are looking for a bit more in their plants. With the internet becoming a ubiquitous part of society, plant growers now want the story behind the plant (Figure 2). They also want a bit more than a season of pretty flowers. Hence the drift back to edibles.

Up until the mid-twentieth century gardening and plant growing were the domain of the male. At that time the shift in why people garden occurred (from food to ornamental) and the main influence on plant purchasing became the women. As an industry we accepted that the key customer was the 55 to 70-year-old female. Around the millennium this changed. The way the family unit (all forms) made decisions went from set areas of influence to both partners discussing and deciding on all purchases.



Figure 2. Plants need a story, not just new. This plant (*G. 'Rozanne'*) was voted plant of the Century in 2003 by RHS.

Ornamental gardening has moved from being a public statement of a person’s wealth or design skills. Either way a beautiful garden is satisfying to the gardener, an added value to the property and something that makes the local community happy. An edible and beautiful garden ticks all the boxes.

As discussed above people originally grew plants for use in the home. They needed to grow what they could not buy. The move back to growing plants for the home has come from several drivers including fashion trends. For many it is still about growing what they cannot buy. First is the range on offer in the food retailers compared with the garden centers. In local supermarkets there are usually only four or five types of tomato—none of which were bred for flavor, worldwide there are over 4500 cultivars of tomato available. Varieties bred for flavor, use, size, color and acidity—all characteristics that are important to the end consumer. In our range we have over; 45 tomatoes, 40 chilies, 20 basil, 30 geraniums scented, 50 mint and 40 thyme. The retail food stores are lucky to have more than 3 or 4 of each.

Second when they grow their own edibles, they have complete control over what fertilizer, pesticides, and other chemicals are used on their food. They can decide to be completely organic or just avoid the worst of the pesticides. They can harvest when they want and when the plants are best harvested for flavor rather than storage. The driver behind their plants is usability and taste not storage, transport and profit. Although most of the large retailers have strict controls on the residual level of pesticides, many consumers don't trust them.

Finally, home grown is often cheaper than store bought herbs. Sometimes the store product is cheaper, but it usually has a much shorter shelf life. Sensible buying and growing can make home grown herbs and vegetables very economically. For many varieties continual harvesting over a full season makes them quite cheap to produce.

As mentioned above edible plants are now trendy and some types are in demand and others not. Like clothing this can change at a moment's notice. The varieties in demand will fluctuate as quickly as weekly or

as slowly as annually. In some cases, an edible maybe used on a popular cooking, renovation or gardening show one day and then sell out the next. This can be frustrating for the industry as it may take several months to rebuild stock levels. As an industry we want to make money, but we also want to make sure our customers get the plants they want.

Food trends are incredibly hard to predict and control as there are a multitude on influencing factors that we cannot control or even modify. The Australian market is pushed by the range of extremely popular cooking shows like MasterChef. An edible featured on an episode will be in demand for the next few weeks. Consumers will go looking in supermarkets at first then to the garden centers. If the industry does well it should be able to persuade buyers to come back in a month or two when the plant is available.

At the same time the growers should be continually searching for "new" and old edibles. They should be constantly trialing these plants to learn how to grow them and to test consumer demand/usage. Indeed, a good grower will not only be aware of current demand but also helping to set future demand.

The cooking shows and food bloggers are always searching for different edibles that they can promote internally. This will often result in them being displayed then/or processed through the administration sector. Like most of the media they are after new material and will respond to new, well presented offerings.

The new direction in edibles will be with us for many years and we just need to understand the drivers as discussed above. The home consumer wants new, tasty and healthy plants with a story. There are still hundreds of edibles out there in industry that are just waiting to be promoted and made available to the masses.