

Specialization—Is This the Future?

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When I first started Liss Forest Nursery I thought that my future lay in specialization and I had to convince my business partner that I was right. My partner was the finance and I was the production. This was way back in 1970 and my chosen subject was rhododendrons. My intention was to grow species, hybrids and the dwarfs together with the Japanese azaleas. Liss Forest Nursery had not long been in existence before I realized that my ideas were not right for me. There were two reasons for this. Firstly I like growing most plants and secondly came the problem of the economics of distribution. Had I not changed my mind, then a third reason would have been cash-flow. Therefore I changed my idea of specialization in rhododendrons to one of growing mainly ericaceous plants. This gave me the opportunity to grow the forms of *Erica* and *Calluna*, *Pernettya* and *Gaultheria* etc., of which I was very fond. I soon widened the range still further when offered cuttings of *Camellia*, *Eucryphia*, *Magnolia*, *Stewartia* etc. Now I was happy. My partner was less happy, saying that one's first ideas are usually the best.

All of this happened within a five year period. The partnership then ended (amicably) and I was on my own. Being on my own meant an empty field, though my partner did give me two polythene tunnels and I took over all the stock which had built up, half of which was mine. The range of plants changed still further now because I had lost much of my source of material. Rhododendrons were no longer the main crop. This was partly because I had lost a free supply of grafting stocks but also more rhododendrons were being produced by cuttings within the trade. We were by now producing large numbers of camellias which occupied our limited propagation facilities. I had a good customer base and knew better what was required. The numbers of most lines were gradually increased, as was the range. Little by little some lines were discontinued and others added, and this continues to the present day. Currently we offer about 1,000 species and hybrids.

You will see then, from my point of view, true specialization is not the future. What I have done in the past I intend to continue into the future. As I see things, distribution is the problem of specialization. One needs large quantities of a popular plant to be able to deliver economically and over a fairly long selling season.

What is specialization? I suspect that specialization means different things to different people. Growing for the garden centre market is specialization. Growing for the landscape sector is specialization. Growing conifers or standard trees or alpines or bedding plants are all forms of specialization. I.P.P.S. members are specialists in plant propagation and our future is in the propagation of both new and old varieties and cultivars. Some members are liner specialists and as such help growers like me to offer a more complete range to our customers.

Where a business employs just one or two people then the limited number of plants that can be produced must be much sought after. Where a large firm is involved then the sales team must advise the propagation management of demand, both in quantity and variety.

Publicity on television or articles written in the papers will greatly influence what the buying public will be asking for and the first feel of demand will be felt by the salesman. This information should be fed to the propagator as soon as possible and management must obtain material at the earliest opportunity in order to meet expected demand. If the firm itself is doing a promotion then everything should have been done to make sure that stock is up to the right levels beforehand.

It is of course possible to specialize within a given field, by selecting certain lines within that field. For instance although many wholesale nurseries might list *Corylopsis pauciflora*, I widened my offerings to *C. glabrescens*, *C. gotoana*, *C. veitchiana* and *C. willmottiae* 'Spring Purple'. I could have added a few more. Dedication to a specific species is only possible in a few instances and our past president, Raymond Evison, with his Clematis bears testimony to this. But this is an exception and his numbers are mind-blowing.

So, to sum up, I do not really see myself as a specialist, although I grow for the garden centre trade, and I do not see the future creating lots of specialists producing to supply bigger concerns that then distribute the products to the garden centres, although I do see groups of growers (as is already happening) doing some joint marketing.

For myself, I see my future looking for interesting old plants and discovering or raising new ones to add to our existing list and improving the publicity by joint promotions.