

The Use of Gang Labour for Nursery Stock Production at Darby Nursery Stock Ltd.

Alastair Hazell

Darby Nursery Stock Ltd, Methwold, Thetford, Norfolk IP26 5NN, U.K.

INTRODUCTION

Darby Nursery Stock Ltd. is situated in a region of intensive agriculture and horticulture. Agricultural production is predominantly on arable farms growing cereals, sugar beet, and potatoes. Horticultural production is mainly field-scale vegetable and soft fruit production. Because of this high density of growing, related companies, such as vegetable processors and packers, have also grown up in and around this area.

The labour requirement for this type of industrial production is still relatively high. However the demand is seasonal. Planting and harvest often requires a high labour input. To fulfill this short term need growers will often really on seasonal staff in the form of gang workers.

THE GANG SYSTEM

The gang system started during the 1920s. It helps to fill the gap in the labour market created by this seasonal staff requirement. Individual workers are employed by a central "gang master" who is then employed by the grower to supply the labour for their job. The advantage for the grower is that they only have to contact one person when looking for a large number of seasonal workers. For the workers the advantage is that their gang master will have several contacts with growers and land-based industries that should provide a whole season of work if required.

Darby Nursery Stock Ltd's use of gangs has developed alongside the growth and development of the nursery. The nursery once formed part of Darby Brothers Farms which was established in the 1950s and was originally involved in growing vegetables, such as celery, lettuce, and radishes. As part of this production, processing and packing units were also set up. Darby Brothers then started a fruit propagation unit, producing soft fruit plants for the fruit production industry. The fruit propagation fitted nicely with the vegetable growing giving a year round production process. Shrub propagation started soon afterwards and was linked to the fruit propagation until the development of the garden centre market in the 1960s and 1970s meant a rapid expansion in the nursery's shrub production. This gave rise to Darby Nursery Stock Ltd which has been trading as a separate company ever since.

The nursery sells container-grown plants to garden centres and retail stores through the Anglia Group, a marketing organisation. Darby Nursery Stock propagates 90% of its stock, sticking around 4.5 million cuttings last season. It grows a wide range of plants but specialises in lavenders, conifers, container-grown trees, climbers (particularly clematis), and soft fruit (especially strawberries).

The farm had traditionally used a large amount of gang labour, both on the field and in the processing and packhouse areas. Fruit propagation also requires gang labour during lifting and grading processes. Initially the shrub propagation opera-

tion only needed a small labour input. However with the rapid expansion of the nursery, the requirement for seasonal labour also increased. Today the nursery employs up to 10 gangs during the busy spring season. This gives it an extra 200 people to work with and they work in every department on the nursery.

Two different types of gang are used. Firstly there are skilled gangs, used for a certain job such as propagation or potting throughout the season. These gangs are smaller in size and often the gang master works alongside the gang members. They tend to have several long-term members who come back year after year.

Secondly there are larger, less specialised gangs. These gang master might have several buses going out each day to a number of different locations throughout the area. These gangs are used for general work on the nursery such as pruning, weeding, plant moving, etc. One of the main differences between these two gang types is that the smaller skilled gangs are based locally to the nursery and are generally made up of ladies from that area. The larger gangs are based in the big towns and are often made up with students and foreign workers. For Darby Nursery Stock these larger gangs mainly come from Kings Lynn and Norwich areas.

MANAGEMENT OF THE GANGS

When employing an extra 200 workers from several different gangs it is important that there is a method of recording who they are, what they are doing, and how much they are being paid. This sounds easy but the personnel within the individual gangs can change day by day, with several gang members only working part weeks. There is also a legal requirement to record the total payments made or given to each gang master per year (Section 16 *Taxes Management Act 1970*). This information has to be sent to the Inland Revenue Agricultural Compliance Unit.

The information for this is gathered and entered onto a form called the ACU2. This is filled in each week by the gang master and sent back to the nursery. It includes each gang worker's name, their full address, national insurance number, and how much they have earned during that week. They also enter the hours worked each day. At the end of each financial year the nursery sends all of the ACU2s to the Agricultural Compliance Unit along with the covering form the ACU3. To ensure that the ACU2s are returned quickly the nursery will not pay the gang master until the forms are received.

There is also an ACU1 that the nursery has to fill in when it takes on a new gang or an existing gang changes its name. The nursery has developed a Gang Labour Time Sheet which is filled in each day by the foreman for whom the gang has been working. The information gathered on this form is the gang name, the job they have been employed on, whether it was days work or piece work, and the time spent on this job. If the job was on piece work the rate and total are also written down. The gang labour time sheet is also accompanied with a signing sheet which has to be signed by all the gang workers who have worked that day. The information given on these forms is used to cross check the information that the gang master enters on the ACU2.

Where possible the gangs work on piece work. The rates are set by the managers and are all given as a price per ten. The piece work sheets are used to record this, these are used when filling in the gang labour time sheet, a copy is also given to the gang worker to give to the gang master who uses it when filling the ACU2. All piece

work sheets are filed and are used for reference when setting new rates. When work is done on days work, a daily tally sheet can be used to record work rate, this is also used when setting piece work.

A “gang worker skills form” has recently been developed as part of the nursery’s health and safety policy. On this several different nursery jobs are listed, such as cane placing and tying, tractor driving, working with a potting machine, etc. Each worker has one of these forms and when they have been trained to do one of the jobs listed, the person doing the training signs the form. This then enables the gang worker to carry out the job. This gives the nursery a record of which gang workers we can use to do certain jobs.

JOBS FOR WHICH GANGS ARE USED

Gangs are used in almost every aspect of production from taking cutting material through to packing the orders just prior to despatch. Whenever gang labour is used the work is overseen by a full-time member of staff, generally a supervisor. This is particularly important when gangs are on piece work because the required standard of work has to be closely monitored and if substandard work is done then the gang is asked to redo the job in their own time. The supervisor is also there to count what has been done during the day and then enter the information on the relevant form. When working on piece work the gang is also required to tidy up at the end of the day and the time spent on this is included in the piece work rate.

Potting. The nursery undertakes both machine and hand potting. Hand potting is generally done from mobile benches situated close to the beds that are to be potted onto. Potting is carried out generally in pairs and the piece work rate includes knocking out and standing down. The total potted each day is divided by two to give each worker their pay for that day. Therefore, the two gang members have to work as a team and we find that most gangs can be subdivided into pairs of workers who will work together.

Machine potting is carried out by a larger team, however the same principle of the total potted divided by the number doing the job is still used when they are potting on piece work. A full-time member of staff is used to control the machine (i.e., to set pot size, drill depth, and speed). They are also responsible for any plant change-overs as well as correctly labelling the plants as they go out of the potting shed. This is important because most gang members have no horticultural background and are not really interested in plants. The machine potting also includes the standing down and the plants stood down are the only plants counted when piece work rates are being worked out. Knocking out and grading is done by a separate team who are also paid by piece work. These piece work rates change with different types of plants, for example more is paid when climbers are potted because they have to be caned before leaving the potting shed. Potting starts in February and continues until June and gang work is used throughout this season. At its peak up to 50 gang workers can be potting on the nursery.

Pruning. This is also carried out by piece work. The rate changes with the type of job required. When pruning on piece work, most gang workers will try to move the plants as little as possible, therefore, when the plants are stood down a special configuration is used enabling someone to work through a bed with out having to

move any plants. To give a uniform job only one person per bed is allowed. This also helps the final counting. Sample plants are used to show what is required and these are often done by the manager with the supervisor before the gangs turn up for work.

Moving. When plants have to be moved and spaced this can also be carried out by gang workers on piece work. This is carried out in pairs. They are given a moving sheet that gives information about the plants to be moved, their location, and where they are to be moved to. The number of plants moved has to be entered on this sheet and this information can be used of the piece work price.

Caning and Tying. Caning and tying is generally done in a similar way to pruning in that one person works per bed. The piece work price varies between the type of plant and the amount of growth needing to be tied. An important thing to consider when putting people on piece work is that the equipment that they use should be in good condition. Gang workers will not have any tools and the nursery has to supply all their needs. At Darby Nursery Stock a large stores holds several secateurs and Max Tapeners. These are regularly serviced and sharpened to enable the work to be carried out as fast as possible.

GANG WORK IN PROPAGATION

Last season more than 4 million cuttings were propagated with a full-time staff of only six people. Skilled gang labour is used to supplement the labour requirement during the busy periods. At peak demand there are more than 22 gang workers solely working in propagation. The gang are used in every aspect of propagation from the collection of cutting material through to the moving of cell trays into the liner potting shed. The only jobs that are not on piece work are cuttings collection and tray washing.

The majority of the labour is used for the jobs of cuttings collection and within the cuttings shed. The shed has up to 12 people working within it. The people within the shed are moved about regularly: for example, after a spell in the shed they are then sent out to collect material. This is done to reduce the risk of repetitive strain injury (RSI) and to give all the workers a spell on piece work where they can earn more money. The piece work rate is worked out on the total number of trays completed each day. It is up to each individual worker to keep a count of what they have done each day but the total money is divided by the gang. Tray filling is done separately and this is also done piece work as is taking the trays to the mist from the cuttings shed. When a new worker is taken on by the gang they are given 2 to 3 days in the cutting shed on days pay, this is done to get them up to speed while still maintaining the desired quality. If they still haven't reached the correct number of trays after this trial period then they are not used in the cuttings shed. Each tray is labelled with the plant name, propagation date, and the workers initials, this gives us the ability to track down poor work. The piece work rate differs between different types of plants on an easy, medium, and hard rate. For example, a *Berberis* would be a hard plant while a lavender would be easy. This is based on the speed that the plants can be handled as well as the quality of the material.

The other main job that takes place in propagation is pruning, also on piece work. The cuttings, once weaned, are stopped. Then once the first breaks have started to grow they are mechanically trimmed. The gang works in propagation from February through to October.