

Nursery Management—The Production of a Textbook for Australian Conditions

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The I.P.P.S. is an organization concerned with seeking and sharing information regarding plant propagation. This paper is about the business of propagation. Without good management, much of the time and effort we devote to propagation, and many of the techniques we continually seek to improve, both lose their purpose.

This paper aims to do two things:

- 1) To encourage more of you to record and write down the knowledge you have, and to provide a glimpse of what is involved in getting your ideas published.
- 2) To raise some issues about nursery management which frequently warrant more attention than they get.

WRITING THE BOOK

Nursery Management is a 142-page hardback book published in April 1994 by Kangaroo Press. I wrote this book with assistance from staff of the Australian Horticultural Correspondence School and a number of friends in the nursery industry.

Producing this publication, like any other non-fiction book involved the following steps:

- Deciding what to write
- Getting the information together
- Structuring/organising it in a sensible, and easy-to-refer-to fashion.
- Wordsmithing
- Finding and dealing with a suitable publisher.

DECIDING WHAT TO WRITE

Deciding why to write a book on nursery management was obvious. Demand for, and a lack of accessible information on nursery management has been apparent for many years. Despite the availability of several Australian books on propagation techniques, and soils; there has been little written, and made readily available in this country, on nursery management.

By early 1993, we had been gathering information for some years; through the activity of our business both in writing and conducting courses, as well as working as a consultant to various nurseries for over a decade or more.

The information was largely there, so there wasn't an excessive amount of work involved in research. This made the prospect of writing the book potentially more profitable.

FINDING A PUBLISHER

Some books find their publisher before the book is written, when it is little more than an idea. Others find their publisher after the writing is completed. Either way, the secret to finding a publisher is the same as selling anything; you must give the

customer what they want. You must convince the publisher that you are doing that, that there is a demand, and that you can supply something relatively unique which won't have too much competition.

A book starts with an idea. We all have ideas, some good and some not so good. A successful book needs a very good idea!

To succeed there must be demand for the book from a large number of people. Without good sales, a publisher will not invest in the book; and without sales, the author will never recover the cost of writing it. Most authors don't make good money, because they don't choose appropriate subjects to write on, and secondly that, it is first impressions that sell a book: the title, the index, the photos and diagrams....not so much the body of the text, no matter how good it is.

The question of how many people might buy a nursery management book was uncertain, but the success of a previous book I had written gave some indication of the potential (i.e., *Starting a Nursery or Herb Farm*, Night Owl Publishers, 1983).

Timing is important. It is generally not a good idea to bring out something on a topic when there is lots of competition in the same subject area. If there is very little material available in print on that topic, then it may be a worthwhile proposition.

STRUCTURING/ORGANISING IT IN A SENSIBLE, AND EASY-TO-REFER-TO FASHION

Once you have the information, it must be put together in a logical and balanced way. Our way of doing this is to work as a team out of two offices, one in Melbourne, one on the Gold Coast. This probably isn't viable for everyone, but our business, by retaining a number of professionals as tutors in the school, can do this. As team leader I developed an outline first which is then commented on and modified by staff at both offices. We then insert information from our computer data base (developed over 12 years). This information is then reworked, expanded, and developed chapter by chapter in one office before being sent to the other office for further reworking and balancing. The aim is to produce writing which is both easy to read, rich in facts, concise, and relevant in a wide range of climates and situations.

WORDSMITHING

If writing is clear, concise, and grammatically correct it is much easier for a publisher to edit. If editing is easier, the publishers costs are less, profits are higher, the book is therefore more likely to remain in print longer, and make more money for the author. The book will also be much easier and enjoyable for readers to use. This will encourage word-of-mouth sales.

DEALING WITH PUBLISHERS

It is essential to use the right publisher for a particular type of book. Different publishers have access to different types of markets. Also, some publishers are more aggressive with selling particular types of books. You can get an idea of what publisher to use by looking at the types of books he publishes, the types of titles he/she acts as agent for, where his/her books sell, etc. Also consider:

- Do his/her titles remain in print for a long time, are they reprinted, are they remaindered?

- Does he/she pay well—advances, frequency of royalties, on time, etc?

Talk to some of his/her other authors.

WHAT WAS WRITTEN

We applied one acid test to choose what to include in this book. This was to ask ourselves:

“Does this information make a difference to productivity and in turn profitability of a nursery” If our answer was “yes”, or even “sometimes”, then it was valid to include it.

Using this test, We developed the following chapters: “Scope & Nature of the Nursery Industry”, “The Nursery Site”, “Production Systems”, “Managing Plants in the Nursery”, “Nursery Materials”, “Tools and Equipment”, “Buildings and Structures”, “Management”, “Marketing”, and “Developing a Nursery Stocklist”

I want to highlight four concerns extracted from the book, which I believe are spoken about and practiced too infrequently:

- 1) Managing people
- 2) Developing a business plan
- 3) Sensitivity analysis
- 4) Marketing

Managing People. Work in a nursery can be divided into several different types of activities (e.g., office work, propagation, potting up, and plant maintenance). It is important to allocate adequate man-hours to each area of work each week. If there are several people working in a nursery, each can be given specific responsibilities—one marketing, one doing general plant maintenance, one doing propagation, etc.

Some nurseries only employ the services of one or two people, and in such cases, work roles are less defined.

Employee Responsibilities. Responsibilities should be clearly defined and preferably in writing, for anyone working in a nursery. A copy of an employee’s responsibilities should be given to each employee when they commence work.

Developing a Business Plan. A business plan is essential for any commercial nursery. They are important as they forecast the nursery’s viability and can help assist with obtaining bank loans. A business plan should take into account what the desired productivity should be and set out systematically what is intended to be done for that productivity to be achieved. A plan is best if developed for a number of years, such as 5 years.

The following cost items (excluding labour and training) are provided as a guide to how you might develop estimates of costs, income, and profit:

- Capital costs—property purchase, grading site & preparing garden bed, drainage pipes, vehicles, trailers, propagation houses, polyhouses, irrigation equipment, surfacing material, hot beds, shadehouses, stock plants, nursery barrows/trolleys, computer/printer, potting and work benches, office equipment, office furniture;

- Operating costs—consumables, fertilizers, pesticides, hormones, disinfectant, spray equipment, trays, pots, soils/media, petrol, office stationery, plant labels;
- Other operating costs—rates, insurance, phone, power, water, advertising/marketing.

Sensitivity Analysis. A nursery is a business based on living materials, not inert materials which can be put in a store room to hold. Plants need constant attention. Due to this there is a need for sensitivity analysis. Sensitivity analysis is involved in monitoring items within production systems which could effect production and the end results of achievable sales.

There are several danger areas which could cause problems in a nursery's development.

These should be given particular attention, and continually monitored.

The sensitive areas of concern are as follows:

- Productivity levels
- Pest and disease
- Plant care
- Obtaining appropriate propagation material
- Inappropriate supervision
- Staff management
- Customer relations
- Financial management
- Marketing
- Production planning
- Record keeping
- Insurance

Marketing. Marketing can make or break a nursery. There are many different ways of marketing nursery products.

Marketing involves:

- The products available (range, quality, diversity)
- Packaging and presenting the goods or services
- Making contact with the person to whom you are selling
- Communication—ensuring they understand about the goods or services
- Convincing—presenting the “product” in a way which favours you achieving the result you are aiming to achieve.
- Follow up—ensuring the “buyer” is satisfied with what they get (in the long term)

SUMMARY

Running a nursery involves a wide range of skills and knowledge, apart from plant propagation and propagation systems and equipment, and the commitment to plan and allocate time to apply such skills and knowledge.