
Specialisation — Advantages and Disadvantages Compared©

Peter Bingham

Kingfisher Nursery, Gedney Hill, Spalding, Lincolnshire PE12 0RU , United Kingdom

Over the past 50 years there have been a number of changes in the nursery trade. One of the most significant is the trend towards specialisation in one form or other. On my own nursery in the late 1970s we grew conifers, shrubs, roses, alpines, and heathers, covering over 1,000 cultivars, and sold to both wholesale and retail customers. The nursery now covers 10 times the area but we only grow heathers, less than 10 species, around 100 cultivars, three pot sizes, only two compost mixes, and are strictly wholesale only. Based on our own experience and those of other nurseries that I have visited, the following are some of my observations.

ADVANTAGES

- Simplicity — Less complicated production schedules are easier to understand, easier to implement, and easier to monitor. Less skilled staff can still achieve good quality work.
- Better labour planning—Annual peaks and troughs are more predictable if the production schedule is simple.
Mechanisation — The volumes of each job become large enough to justify investment in specialist equipment..
- Knowledge — It is better to focus on a specific skill or genus and become an expert than to be jack-of-all-trades and master of none.
- Reputation — If you can become the acknowledged expert in your field and the nursery can gain a reputation for quality and reliability the demand for your plants will increase.

International Plant Propagators'
Society, Combined Proceedings
2005, Volume 55.

- Buying power — Pots, compost, and packaging can be bought in large volumes, which should bring the price down. Large volumes also help to make bespoke packaging or labels more viable.
- Promotion — By focusing on one crop, and getting a reputation for being good at it, you can build an image, whereas too many operations can cause confusion among potential customers.
- Continuity of supply — Simple records that can help to predict times of peak demand and larger volumes help smooth out the changing trends from one season to another. We have found this is one of the main reasons established customers remain loyal to us and new customers select us. Before we specialised we ran out too often and customers went elsewhere; some never returned.
- Increased efficiency — Bespoke machinery, bespoke growing facilities, well-tuned production schedules, and well-defined techniques all offer savings, as do larger batch sizes and streamlined despatch systems.
- Seasonal breaks — Whilst we try to balance the labour profile to keep regular staff usefully employed all year round, we have found advantages in having periods of reduced pressure to catch up maintenance and repairs, plan ahead, or even take holidays. When we grew more crops, there were very few breaks and often overlaps, which led to stress and errors, if prolonged.

DISADVANTAGES

- Vulnerability — To pest and disease spread. Lack of rotation can lead to a build-up of pathogens. Resistances to control measures can develop.
- Fashion change — This can lead to reduced demand for your crop, which can lead to reduced prices.
- Weather — If your crop relies on impulse sales over a short season it can be vulnerable to reduced sales if the weather is wrong. Frost, drought, etc., can also have a serious impact on your growing crop.
- Quality of life — Specialisation can lead to a lack of variety of tasks. Mass production can become tedious for some, although there are always challenges to overcome — you can never know everything.
- Seasonal peaks — Can cause high labour demands, cash flow problems, and administrative stress.
- Customers — To sell more plants in a limited range you will need more customers or larger customers. More customers can increase delivery distances and hence costs. Larger customers can leave large gaps if they change suppliers.
- Less flexibility — Changing cropping can be more difficult due to lack of knowledge, outlets, equipment, and facilities.

OVERVIEW

Specialisation can offer many advantages when it goes well but create problems if it goes wrong. It is wise to keep as many options open as possible and always consider the worst-case scenario before making the commitment.

Maintain flexibility in facilities and equipment where you can. Develop an interest in a range of plants that could offer alternatives whilst using existing facilities.

Economies of scale can still be achieved when growing a broad range of plants, provided they all fit into the same system, using the same compost mixes, equipment, facilities, and customer base.

One of the keys to successful specialisation is good record keeping and analysis. It is important to separate the winners from the losers before getting too committed. Unless you can get good percentage takes, produce high percentage first quality, and sell all you grow, there will be no advantage gained.

You should work to your strengths and those of your situation to develop a unique selling proposition. Your existing customers may be helpful in identifying your strengths and suggesting opportunities.

Your own personality should also be considered; unless you have a capacity for streamlined processes you may not enjoy running a specialist nursery.