

**LADDS OF SWANLEY**  
JOHN DE PUTRON  
*Caledonia Nursery,*  
*Guernsey, Channel Islands*

It seems to me that it may well be appropriate today, after the welter of expertise that we have enjoyed; that we look back for a few minutes at the methods and schedules of a nursery which, in its prime 42 years ago, was the notable Pot Plant Nursery in the United Kingdom.

Strictly speaking, Philip Ladds of Swanley, were not hardy plant producers, but the whole set up was so exceptional in all aspects, that I hope you can bear with me for a while. It is true, that very little was produced that was unusual, nor were the methods especially unusual; in fact, I suppose traditional would be the best word to describe the whole enterprise.

Yet I have always been fascinated by the process of knitting together on six nurseries of 150 acres in North Kent, the output for Covent Garden of about 1¼ to 1½ million pot plants each year and about 80 acres of this total was employed in open ground cut flower production, which I will only enumerate; 45 acres of outside chrysanthemums, 10 acres of dahlias, 8 acres of paeonies, with the balance in bulbs. The production of these chrysanthemums and dahlias presented a big burden to the plant propagating department.

The staffing was about 150 persons, plus 30 dis-budders for the summer outside. Each crop was supervised by a foreman, his journeymen and apprentices. There was a two tier system of production, propagators handing the material over to the growers at the appropriate time in a crop life.

The main interest for us today will be, of course, the pot plant production, which was based on an all year sale through our warehouse in Covent Garden in order to provide a continuous cash flow. It is interesting to note, that, as far as I can remember, the words "cash flow" did not exist in our present context, and I suppose liquidity meant a leaky greenhouse.

Before I give you the crop facts and figures there is one cultural point that I find interesting. Many of the plants were brought to the peak of perfection by being placed on standing ground for three or four months before the final housing prior to selling, and whilst this meant a lot of work and expense, as far as I can see, no alternative has been found that will produce such uniform quality; this may well account for the decline of these lines, as the expense of this additional double handling was prodigious.

Heaths for Christmas were the major crop and 250,000 were

sent to London each season in December. The cuttings were taken from November to March and the sale was 24 months later in December, including four months in the open. The cultivars were 'Gracilis', 'Nivalis' and 'Hyemalis', and the sizes were in 60's, 48's, and 32's. The cuttings were put under double glass and potted on into 72's.

Hydrangeas were the next crop; that took over one year, single heads being struck in summer to sell the following May and June and the multiheads struck in late summer for sale 18 months later. Here the total was about 40,000. In those days the blueing was very important and alum was introduced at the first potting.

The solanums, about 75,000, were of course an annual crop, sown in January and sold in December with four months in the open; the selection of the mother plant took place each year in November and was based on compact growth and large berries. The secret of the best presentation of the plants is the careful trimming needed to prepare the plant for sale — and this is done in November.

The main crops for early New Year were the cyclamens, producing about 25,000; it is worthy of note that no attempt was made to force them for December sales. I think the more gentle growth produced, the better the plant and, of course, their sale after New Year brought colour to the drab months of January to March and reduced the pressure and gluts in the Christmas sales, such as many of us saw this year.

It was always a matter of the greatest concern then, as now, to avoid gluts, because plants in the nursery left unsold were not able to be grown on for a further year but were destroyed.

We used *Cytisus racemosus*, then called *Genista fragrans*, as the plant for Easter; 45,000 were prepared over 18 months and mostly sold in 48's. It is sad that this plant has nearly disappeared from the florist's windows; the skill here is the cutting back to produce a rounded free-flowering plant. Many of you know that, as a hardy shrub in the southwest and other maritime climates, it will flower for eight to ten months.

The plants for bedding and window boxes contributed to the London scene, and we depended greatly on the demand of the social season. The orders for Ascot, Hurlingham, Henley and the City and West End helped to clear about 15,000 cineraria raised from seed, 125,000 geraniums from cuttings. Incidentally, the clone of 'Crampel' that was used was preserved each season on a nursery in Guernsey; 20,000 salvia were raised from cuttings — this was a strain of very compact growth and long spiked blooms. In addition, 60,000 marguerite and 15,000 calceolaria were raised from cuttings. In addition to this, we usually produced imported

plants gently forced — 7,000 rhododendron and mollis with blued blooms and 10,000 spiraea were our normal output.

And lastly, the small section with which we endeavoured to keep in touch with the general nursery trade, 75,000 dahlia and the same number of chrysanthemums were all sold, not as rooted plants, but ex 72's; in addition 50,000 fuchsias were sold all over the United Kingdom in 60's.

Research into new crops went on continuously — and included subjects like a range of Cape heaths imported, tried and sadly abandoned as unacceptable to the market. This also was the fate of sansevieria tried, I suppose, 15 years too soon.

Finally, we sent out about 25,000 conifers raised from cuttings and used in window boxing. I can think of many nurseries who now would like to sell 25,000 conifers for window boxes, knowing that the sale will be repeated each year.

I feel very guilty in relating a small story that is perhaps irrelevant today, but I feel somewhere in those happy memories we can find useful information for the present problems that confront us, if only to retain a cockney humour in the face of GLUTS.