

Propagating vs. Selling Liners: Can You Sell What You Propagate?

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When deciding whether or not to grow and sell rooted liners, first consider the requirements for marketing your product. Often more time is spent gathering information on growing and caring for plants than on selling them. Because most nurseries are owner operated, the owner must not only know how to produce the plants but also know how to sell them.

I have developed six major categories which you as a professional should carefully plan and execute to establish a successful liner business.

Marketing. Marketing your product is number one. Without a marketing plan to sell what you produce you will soon be out of business. You must determine what cultivars or varieties of liners will sell best. You must also determine the quantities that should be grown to meet the anticipated demand without overproducing, and what size the liners should be to meet the market you are targeting. Timeliness is also a key factor. The liners must be ready when the market is ready.

Be prepared to advertise the liners you grow. Catalogs or price lists should be assembled listing sizes and prices. Advertising in trade publications and listing in their classified sections helps you target your sales. Trade shows are an excellent opportunity to display your products and to meet potential customers. Be sure to select trade shows in areas that you are best able to serve.

Trade association membership is an important part of being in the nursery industry. Local, state and national associations provide legislative assistance, and give members an opportunity to meet others in their field of production. It is important for your name to be familiar in the trade when you are a grower.

Stock Plant Selection. Stock plant selection is the key to producing healthy, vigorous liners. Cuttings should be from either established stock blocks or existing inventory, plants should exhibit vigorous growth and be the desired form of the species. A proper fertility balance should be maintained in stock plants to aid in rooting cuttings. And most important, stock plants should be free of any form of pest.

Production Techniques. Production techniques vary from nursery to nursery depending upon geography, species of plants, and the target market. Your intended market will affect your choice of rooting media, container size, and pre- and post-rooting conditions.

Your rooting media should be compatible with the media used by the grower buying your liners in order for your customers to get good root extension. The media should be of a consistency that drains well while retaining enough moisture to maintain vigorous growth.

Containers in a vast array of sizes and designs are available from many manufacturers. The main consideration in choosing container sizes should be

what best fits your customers' needs, not necessarily your own. Containers from 1 3/4 to 3 in. are suggested for liners going into 1-gal containers. Liners for 3-gal production should be in 3- to 4-in. containers.

Getting the cuttings off to a good start under optimum conditions is the most critical step in growing healthy vigorous liners. At Bennett's Creek Nursery we call this our "Intensive Care Unit", with detailed attention given to moisture, temperature and pest control.

Postrooting conditions or hardening-off is the final stage in preparing rooted liners for shipping. Our rooted liners are removed from the optimal conditions of the "Intensive Care Unit" to acclimate them to field conditions. Intermittent mist is replaced with daily watering as needed, and light intensity is increased to firm up the stems and new growth.

Consistency. Consistency is crucial in developing your liner business. Maintaining plant quality requires keeping plants pest free along with proper pruning to produce full, multibranching liners. Maintaining consistent liner sizes from year to year and having liners available when needed by customers will lead to repeat customers.

Packaging. Liner packaging is another consideration in the process of growing liners to sell. The less stress a liner endures the better that liner will transplant and grow in the field. Liners are usually packed in boxes or in trays. Each method has pros and cons, and you must select what works best for your customers

Boxes or crates are the most widely used packaging method. The pros for boxing include shipping more liners per square foot and needing no shelving in the shipping trucks. The negative side to boxing is obvious because box stacking leads to damaged plants if the bottom boxes get crushed during shipping. Liner water and light requirements need immediate attention during both packaging and unpacking.

When liners are shipped in trays, less breakage and damage occurs. One of the main advantages of using trays is that immediate unpacking upon receipt of a shipment is not required. The negative side of using trays is that shelving is required in the shipping trucks.

Shipping. Your final major decision will be how to ship your liners. Because freight charges add to the overall cost of liners, it is important to consider the shipping cost per unit for whatever method of shipping is used. Decide what geographical areas you want to serve and the minimum quantities you are willing to ship. You have better control over the handling of your liners if you use your own trucks or trailers.

Other available shipping services include common carriers, parcel services, air freight, and independent truckers. Each of these alternatives has advantages and drawbacks, but you must be sure when using any of these services that your liners are packaged to withstand rough handling.

Bottom Line. Quality, consistency and timeliness are the bottom-line for producing liners that customers will reorder from year to year