



Nurseries such as Hoo House Nursery (left) in Gloucestershire raise most of their own plants; garden centres buy in stock (below), often from the Continent.



SHUTTERSTOCK

Trading is changing

Plant nurseries are the lifeblood of gardening in the UK. With an array of challenges on the horizon, what can they do to survive and thrive?

Author: **Melissa Mabbitt**, horticulturist and garden writer

If you're a gardener, browsing around a nursery is one of life's great pleasures. But like all areas of retailing, plant sellers are under pressure. The shift to buying online, an aging customer base, fewer skilled workers and the arrival of new plant pests and diseases are all challenges to these businesses. Many small nurseries have closed, their land sold for more lucrative developments, while a lack of young nursery staff starting new businesses means nurseries are now increasingly uncommon. So is the golden age of the British independent nursery behind us, or do these shifting sands mean a new model of business needs to be adopted? Should the horticultural industry now turn these challenges into opportunities?

Putting on a show

Helen Boem, Floral Marquees Manager for RHS Shows, has close contact with many independent nurseries. She says there are new exhibitors appearing every year at shows, but acknowledges smaller independent nurseries are finding it harder to appear. As owners reach retirement age, many are less keen to undertake the big physical commitment of exhibiting at shows, and there are fewer young people starting businesses to replace them. It is a trend substantiated by Eurostat (the body that produces statistics for the European Union) which reported in 2010 that 35 percent of growers were older than 60.

'There are not that many young people coming into the industry,' Helen says. 'Younger growers are in their 30s or 40s, not their 20s. They can't afford the initial outlay – the cost of land or the monthly overheads – to start a new nursery.'

A shortage of workers is another challenge for

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Helen Boem, Floral Marquees Manager for RHS Shows

existing nurseries. Some businesses cannot attend shows as it is getting harder to find staff to water and maintain plant stocks back at the nursery. The RHS offers help with a bursary scheme giving nurseries who have never exhibited at an RHS Show before the opportunity to apply for funding to cover the cost of travel and accommodation.

Tim Upton, RHS Director of Horticulture says, 'The Society has been supporting independent nurseries for years – they cultivate the fantastic diversity of plants we enjoy in the UK, provide horticultural knowledge and share the passion people have for plants. Ever since the RHS was formed, we've wanted to promote what nurseries grow. Across our summer and garden shows in 2018, we welcomed around 230 nurseries; we have given bursaries for new nurseries to exhibit at shows; and all the work we do each year producing *RHS Plant Finder* (and the thousands of associated pages on



the RHS website) promotes nurseries,' says Tim. 'With the opening in May of the Welcome Building at RHS Garden Wisley, Surrey, we will be promoting and profiling more British nurseries than before. We really believe now is the time for more people to support them – and for nurseries to work to share their passion with as many people as possible.'

Brighter future online

For those businesses that have embraced online retailing, the future may be bright. It is far cheaper to grow a few collectible plants at home and sell them online via a website (using social media for marketing) than to set up a traditional nursery.

Grower Will Purdom, of exotics nursery Botanico (see p42) is an example of this new approach. Daniel Michael started in a similar way, selling succulents on eBay while working as a gardener at »



**Capitalising on communication
Fibrex Nurseries, Warwickshire**



Heather Godard-Key, who manages Fibrex Nurseries' show displays and its social media accounts, started a Facebook page five years ago to publish growing tips. 'It was just a bit of fun really,' she says. 'But it started capturing people's imagination and I found it was an ideal way to spark conversations.'

Through their use of social media, sales have taken off. 'We put out a new plant two weeks ago and it has already sold out,' Heather says. 'The zonartic pelargoniums, of which we have 75 selections, are so popular we can't keep up with demand.'

Their success, Heather thinks, is that they don't approach social media as a sales tool. 'I wasn't aiming to sell via social media, it was more about engaging with people, but the fact is it drives sales as a bonus. It also opened up our customer base massively. With social media your platform is the whole world.'

See pp63–66 for more on Fibrex Nurseries.

**Facing up to change
Harveys Garden Plants, Suffolk**



Hardy herbaceous plant specialist Roger Harvey has been running his nursery for more than two decades. He puts his success down to being flexible in the face of change.

He says, 'It's fascinating to me how the business has to evolve. People used to travel a long way to visit a nursery, but in the last few years sales have switched to online.'

To combat the reduction in footfall, he opened a new café on site in 2007, which went on to win awards for its food. 'People would come to the nursery and expect better facilities, such as those you might see at garden centres. Having a café meant the nursery was a bit more of a draw.'

Now Roger is heading towards retirement, and so the nursery must evolve again. 'My daughter would have liked to take over but she is also a lawyer and has her own career, so there is no one really here to take it on.'

His answer will be to focus the business more on snowdrops, for which the nursery is already well known. Roger will soon be selling more of the nursery. 'Nurseries face an uphill battle in terms of getting people in, unless you've got a major attraction, such as a beautiful garden. We are selling our large agricultural barn to be developed into two dwellings. There will be a smaller building for the snowdrop business and we will focus more on garden design. Any business has to keep evolving,' Roger says.





Making micro mighty
Botanico, Suffolk



At 23, Will Purdom is one of the youngest people to be running a successful nursery business in the UK: Botanico, a nursery specialising in exotics. ‘No-one my age is into growing, because people don’t realise how amazing it is, but the big problem is the expense of land,’ he says.

So he has followed an unconventional route into the industry. As a teenager he began experimenting with growing exotics from seed. ‘I ended up with all these bamboo seedlings and someone suggested I put them on eBay. There was one, *Phyllostachys edulis*, that everyone wanted and I was suddenly making money.’

He invested in polytunnels, built in his parents’ back garden. He went on to study at Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh and developed a fascination for exotics such as *Hedychium*, *Canna*, *Arisaema* and *Impatiens* species, which he sowed as seed while he was home for the holidays. With help from his mum with watering while he was away, plants were large enough for sale by the time he returned in summer. Since finishing university, he has set up a small concession at a local garden centre. His aim is to keep expanding bit by bit with the ultimate goal of being able to afford land of his own for a larger nursery, but he says the future is selling online.

Through his website and eBay he already sells to the UK and Europe. ‘Sales I make from the small space I have at the garden centre don’t match what I sell online,’ he says. With attractive branding, international sales and with an application for a Plant Heritage National Plant Collection of *Impatiens* in the works, Will’s customers never realise he runs his enterprise on such a small, but impressively efficient, scale.



St Michael’s Mount in Cornwall, but eventually set up a physical retail nursery: Surreal Succulents in Cornwall. Both specialise in a single type of plant and they demonstrate that, despite challenges, it is possible to make a success of a nursery business if it can tap into a specialist market.

Simon and Jay McWilliams of Hedgehog Plants in Suffolk (see August 2018, pp35–38) are another example. They took over a nursery in 2015, which had been trading for 30 years but with dwindling success. They transformed it. ‘We had to change the whole ethos,’ says Simon. ‘About 50 percent of turnover previously was from knick-knacks, but we realised it could be so much better if we made it all about the plants. Increasingly we are getting more specialist customers, people who really know their plants. We can give people expert advice, and if we get a customer that’s interested, we retain them.’

International changes and challenges

Demographic change is not the only challenge to face the UK nursery trade. Gerard Clover, Head of Plant Health at the RHS, explains that governments around the world are seeking ways to deal with the transfer of pests and diseases due to global trade. ‘The overall trend is for increasing globalisation, greater complexity of supply chains and more chances to transfer pests and diseases,’ he says.

According to the Horticultural Trades Association, which represents a cross-section of British growers,

Perspective from *The Plantsman*



James Armitage, Editor of RHS magazine *The Plantsman*, argues that challenges independent nurseries face are not just a threat to business, but have wider ramifications for plant diversity in the UK. The potential consequence of specialist nurseries shutting is the long-term loss of expert knowledge and rare plants.

‘My main concern is over the loss of diversity,’ he says. ‘An awful lot of rare plants are only offered by small, specialist nurseries. The rest of the world doesn’t have the cultivated plant diversity we do in the UK, and we shouldn’t take it for granted. It is incredibly important in terms of biodiversity. If nurseries do shut we will potentially lose that speciality knowledge and stock – this is a fundamental threat to plant diversity.’

retailers, landscapers and manufacturers, DEFRA adds between five and 10 pests each month to its UK Plant Health Risk Register of more than 1,000. Many are low risk, but DEFRA analyses them all.

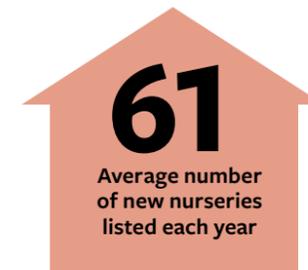
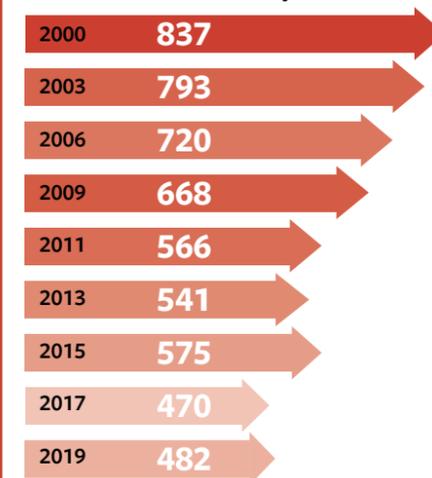
For Richard McKenna, Managing Director of Provender Nurseries in Kent, an independent wholesaler of plants to the landscape industry, the horticultural trade could not continue without imports, so the threat of new pathogens must be managed for nursery businesses to survive.

‘It is not viable to prevent the huge numbers of plants from abroad,’ he says. ‘But as the trade has to take place, it must be done well.’



UK nurseries 2010-2019

Numbers listed in *RHS Plant Finder* have almost halved in the last 19 years



RHS Plant Finder

For more than 30 years, *RHS Plant Finder* (see p8) has been a record of the hundreds of thousands of plants available in cultivation in the UK and, importantly, the nurseries that stock them. Though it only offers a snapshot (being listed in its pages is voluntary) it does offer insight into a changing industry.



Provender visits and checks all plant growers they buy from, making sure everything from compost and soil to production procedures meets their standard. But Richard worries that many small businesses don't, or can't, enforce the same rigour. 'There are an awful lot of little nurseries selling under the radar and they may not be aware of their own unintended impact. All it takes is for the wrong plant to come in and a new disease will be let loose.'

Brexit effect

Alongside this, there's a risk international trade will become harder because of the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union. It may already be compelling more nurseries to increase production, according to Sally Cullimore, Policy Executive at the Horticultural Trades Association. She reports that there is already evidence of this happening among the larger nurseries (usually wholesalers) they represent. 'The Brexit effect has encouraged people to look at their UK supply chain rather than importing. The trend has been over the last year for UK-sourced sales to increase: initial figures show increases near 10 percent. The UK industry hasn't seen growth like this for years.'

The picture is one of a changing industry of waxing and waning businesses. Nurseries that are large enough to take advantage of new technology and handle the increasing complexity of international trade are doing well, but traditional, family-run nurseries must evolve or risk fading away. The best opportunities are for those who can find a specialism to tap into, capitalising on having true expertise, and can embrace new ways of finding customers, growing the healthy plants that buyers want. For small independent nurseries, niche may be the new normal, but the opportunity may be brighter than many have thought. ○

Resources

In *The Garden* podcast April 2019, Melissa Mabbitt expands on what she uncovered researching this feature: rhs.org.uk/thegardenpodcast

Opening next month, the retail area of the Welcome Building at RHS Garden Wisley will help promote independent British nurseries.

To see the best nurseries, visit the RHS Shows. For information and tickets: rhs.org.uk/shows

RHS Plant Finder 2019 is available this month (see p8), listing more than 78,000 plants. To order your copy, visit: rhsshop.co.uk



Tightening up on trade Plantbase, East Sussex



Graham Blunt runs Plantbase, a nursery specialising in exotic plants. He sees risks but also opportunities in the new international economic landscape.

Uncertainty around Brexit means he has missed out on at least one big order this year.

'Every year we have a big order from Austria, but I had to cancel this year's as I didn't know what the costs of transport would be after Brexit,' he says. However, he thinks tightening restrictions in cross-border trade due to disease concerns offers a great opportunity for small to medium-sized specialist growers such as him. 'It's a perfect storm. It will put out of business nurseries who just buy stuff in, only to sell it on with no checks – carrying disease straight out into circulation. But it could be really good for us and others like us. It will potentially make our plants more expensive but we will all benefit because it may force growers to rely on their own stock.'

