

## WHERE HAVE ALL THE PROPAGATORS GONE?

SAM MACDONALD

*Barguillan Nurseries,  
Taynuilt, Argyll, Scotland*

Last year Barguillan Nurseries joined the queue for a top class plant propagator. We had high expectations when we ran advertisements in the national trade press. Two months later and almost a £1,000 poorer we drew a blank. Three advertisements had drawn five applicants—none of them suitable—and all of them glaringly underqualified.

Thinking that the right candidate might not have applied because, let's face it, who wants to travel 400 miles north to the backwoods for a job. We re-wrote the advertisement and placed it again without the banner of Barguillan, simply inviting the right man or woman to name a salary and apply to an anonymous box number. In fact, the advertisement sounded very positive and we were bitterly disappointed with the response. Three replies. Same story.

Curious about the lack of response and anxious to see whether other nurseries had had similar disappointments, I contacted David Clark at Notcutts and John Hedger at Fargro, along with several other nurseries that I approached informally on the topic. The story was the same everywhere. Poor response to appeals for propagators, and even Notcutts, with the prestige of a company of its size, had received only four replies to an advertisement for an assistant propagator in July last year.

Further research led to widespread feeling of concern about the situation and, around Christmas time, John Costin suggested that I do a little more work on the subject and present my findings to the present Conference.

It sometimes helps to start at the beginning and during my research I studied the IPPS G.B. & I. register of members to establish exactly what standing the propagator has within the Society. As a quick look at the breakdown of the membership reveals 7 per cent of the membership describe themselves as propagators (Table 1). We are rapidly becoming a professional rather than a craft-oriented Society with increasing numbers of members in the academic, advisory, and technical areas.

Many proprietors, managers, and foremen may well have moved up through the ranks of nurserymen/propagators to the level they are at now but nevertheless the picture clearly reveals a strong movement away from the craft level. If there is a serious shortage of skilled propagators in the industry—now being described as one dependent on mere 'stickers of cuttings' rather than truly skilled propagators—could we look further and try and identify some of the

**Table 1.** IPPS G.B.&I. membership category breakdown. Total Membership, 442.

Professional Categories			Nursery Categories		
Academics	69	15%	Proprietors	61	14%
Advisors	26	6	Directors	56	12
Technical staff	17	4	Managers	52	11
Research staff	6	1	<b>PROPAGATORS</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>7</b>
Micropropagators	3	0.6	Foremen	23	5
Consultants	3	0.6	Nurserymen	19	4
			Partners	17	3
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>123</b>		<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>259</b>	

causes for the change?

In May of this year I prepared a short questionnaire and researched the companies which had advertised for propagators over the previous 14 months. Delving through the advertising pages of the trade press enabled me to identify them and I found that 36 nurseries, local authorities, and some National Trust properties had advertised. The questionnaire was sent out to all of them and I received a 40 per cent response. The questions covered a wide range of interest but, in particular, looked to establish what responses the advertisement elicited, what pay was offered, and what responsibilities were involved. What shortages of skills were revealed in the replies, what status the propagator enjoyed and whether it had decreased or increased in the last 10 years. It also covered training and what suggestions employers could make to bring about some improvement.

Some of the salient points from the replies are summarised below:

**How many replies did you have to your last advertisement?**

Average: 6.6 (One local authority had 25)

**Did the respondents have the skills you required?**

Yes 15 per cent  
No 85

**Rates of pay offered?**

4-6,000 31%  
6-8,000 49%  
8-10,000 19%  
10,000 + .05%

**What shortfalls in skills did respondent reveal?**

Experience 75%  
Plant knowledge 24%  
Propagation skill 24%  
Business know-how 13%  
Enthusiasm 10%  
Staff management 14%  
Quality Control 13%

**What further comments do you have on the quality and experience of the applicants?**

'In 23 years we have had applications from only 2 propagators . . .'

'Too many people think propagation is easy'  
 'Poor wages in the public sector probably the reason'  
 'No applicants because of the expense of living in Surrey'  
 'Lack of practical experience in a wide field'  
 'We felt that to find an experienced, motivated person who would fit in here would be difficult and would demand an unreasonable salary . . .'

**Do you have any suggestions as to how to tackle the shortage of propagators?**

'Better training . . .'  
 'Colleges to pay top salaries for propagation staff'  
 'Often the talent is about but you have to be able and willing to pay for it . . .'  
 'Teach propagation as a specialist subject such as accountants get specialist instruction . . .'  
 'You have to pay them too much to get them to Guildford'  
 'More money would help'  
 'Not enough time is given to young staff to enthuse over plants and how to multiply them.'  
 'Train your own and keep them away from colleges.'  
 'Better pay and status plus more job satisfaction'

**Explain what you perceive as a fall in interest in propagation over the last 10 years.**

Increase in interest—	Only one respondent
Decrease seen—	95%
No change in 10 years—	4%

**Comments**

'I believe its a very serious fall'  
 'Opportunities in other departments now greater . . .'  
 'Most young people are motivated by the wish to drive and want jobs with tractor driving involved.'  
 'Young people go for higher paid jobs. Propagation is seen as boring.'  
 'There is easier money to be made in other areas of horticulture.'  
 'Government cut-backs have resulted in poor wages'  
 'Jobs in horticulture are for the laggards at school: statements as, 'I feel you would be best suited to a job in gardening or horticulture . . .'  
 'The industrialisation of amenity and ornamental horticulture has killed the green-fingered mythology . . .'

**What sort of training programmes do you offer propagators?**

No training at all	31%
Some in-house training	39%
Day-release	26%
Other forms of instruction	4%

**What level of status does the propagator enjoy?**

75 per cent felt he or she enjoyed a high level of status, and that it was: the most rewarding job on nurseries; the most creative position; the most interesting job; requires the best skills and discipline.

Earlier this month I spent time travelling around Britain combining a sales trip with meeting IPPS propagators in the evenings to find out their side of the story. The picture here is very similar. There

is a general feeling that interest in the propagation department has fallen off, and as plant range has contracted over the last 10 years skills have deteriorated. A number of propagators commented on how little training is offered, particularly at colleges where only 'propagation principles' are tacked on to parts of other courses. In far too many cases propagators felt themselves isolated from the nursery, cut off to the point where they had no say in the way the nursery was run and developed and were rarely consulted.

There is a widespread misapprehension about the impact micropropagation is going to have. The prestige the traditional propagator used to enjoy has been eroded by micropropagation and direct sticking, which is gaining in popularity, as well as streamlined production and, industrial techniques among the largest and most prestigious nurseries in the country whose ranges of plants have contracted.

This insecurity is increased further by the development of the specialist nurseries who are now filling the propagator 'skill gap' by becoming producers of large quantities of rarer items as liners and rooted cuttings. The more propagators I spoke to the harder it was to escape the feeling that morale is very low but also a feeling that the image of the industry as a billion pound sector of the economy clashes dramatically with the realities faced by those at the top in the craft sector. Look around today at some of the high-tech equipment on display and see the scale of the resources being thrown into the propagation house. Doesn't it contrast sharply with the feelings of the men and women who work with the equipment, and shouldn't we be taking more account of their feelings and developing ways to involve them more creatively?

It is, perhaps, a good time to move to specific cases to try and flesh out the subject. To highlight some of the points, I have summarised a profile of three propagators around the country—two involved in very large companies, one from a more modest outfit.

Let's take Bob, who works at Hillside Nurseries. I have substituted new names to protect their identities, but Bob is a case in point.

Bob joined the company in 1962 on the then standard wages of £4.8s per week. He has been with the company for 25 years and has served with exemplary loyalty. He has risen through the ranks to the position of head of one of their propagation sections where he is responsible for the production of 1.2 million cuttings per year and for the supervision of a staff of 12. Curiously Bob is depressed about his work and feels let down by a feeling that he has no where else to go in the company and has a sense that there is nothing left to aim at. He feels neglected and out of touch from a lot of what goes on around him and complains that he is not involved or consulted in planning. Yet he has been informed that the company intends to increase production by 40 per cent over the next five years. Despite

this general uneasiness and frustration Bob turned down a job offer from a local parks department, despite a 30 per cent increase in wages, for no other and no more significant reason than he "just likes the work here . . ."

Bob's current salary is £9,800 with few perks or bonuses. However, he did have a letter from the company last Christmas thanking him for the work he had done during the year!

According to figures supplied to me by the Low Pay Unit in London the average manual worker pay packet is £207.50 per week. Need I remind you that Bob has worked for a company which from the last set of accounts I was able to lay my hands on through Companies House turned over more than £6.2 million, and remember he has worked for them for 25 years and is occupying a very reasonable position yet he is being paid less than the average manual wage. Surely this sounds unusual? It is not. Let's take another case:

Pete joined Highbury Nurseries on an apprenticeship scheme in early 1975 and in the three years since has worked in all departments and managed to fit in a HNC at Hadlow in 1979-80. Following what he called the "Highbury bust up" Pete was asked to stay on and offered the head propagators job and a tied house on £76.00 week. He is currently responsible for one full-time and two part-time workers and is asked to produce only 75,000 ericaceous plants per year. I say only because he would like to do more and feels he has the staff to do it but not encouraged to think that way. Pete's feelings about the job are negative. He's upset about the leaking facilities in the propagation house and claims that no one is interested in what he does. He gets little encouragement, is supervised by a former sales representative, gets no support from the family that owns the nursery and feels he is working for a company that has lost its way and its will for expansion. He says he feels he is not involved at all, and that targets of production are so low he sits around for months pretending he is working. Pete currently earns £125.00 per week which if you remember is also a long way short of the average manual wage packet of £207.50.

At Valley Nurseries I spoke to Dick. He came to Valley after his family's rose business was taken over by a larger concern. He graduated in 1985 from Bath University where his contemporaries considered it astounding that he was giving up the chance to earn what they called "real money" by going into the nursery stock sector which, between 1969-1983 claimed less than 8 per cent of the Bath graduates, confirming yet again that we live and earn our living in the least glamorous and most poorly paid sector of horticulture. Notcutts and 30 other companies incidently turned Dick down as "overqualified" thereby making another striking comment on how employers see their future.

Dick started in propagation and has remained there. He is now

one of 15 supervisors in a company producing more than 2 million plants a year. He has just been appointed to plan, supervise, and run a £20,000 microplant unit for Valley Nurseries. He feels very positive about the company and the opportunity he has been offered. However morale varies from department to department and Dick feels that the path for increased production has been done at the expense of health and safety and that despite regular manager meetings there is a feeling that more could be done to involve the supervisors in the planning.

Dick will be appointed to his new position with a full degree in horticulture and with good mathematics and computer skills on a wage of £144 per week which didn't sound too good to me but he says he accepts it and that the company has a reputation for pushing the high fliers on at a good pace once they have established themselves. Nevertheless, that £144 per week when added to the qualifications of a university graduate match poorly with that average wage of £207.50 for manual workers.

I have spent a great deal more time preparing this paper than I intended to. Like all subjects it gets more fascinating the more you investigate it. I would like to have sent a detailed questionnaire to a larger number of actual propagators and largely as an afterthought, because time was running out, I sent out just a set of questions to all 31 members of the IPPS who describe themselves as propagators.

I put the questions in a way to elicit the most positive response I could without exercising the prejudices that were hardening in my heart. Time does not allow me to elaborate much on their replies because they were incomplete and left too late in the day. Nor were the replies numerous enough to draw too many empirical conclusions.

However for what it's worth 69 per cent of those who replied were negative about their role in the company they worked for and 30 per cent either positive or neutral and careful not to seem too outspoken. What was common to all replies was the enormous enthusiasm for the job itself and the overall feeling that these men and women felt sure they had more to contribute if they were given the chance.

A few of the strongest comments are:

"I think that propagators have been seriously undervalued. It shows in the number that have set up their own nurseries. It shows also in the fact that college-trained managers are two a penny but that propagators are never available . . ."

"A good propagator should keep up with the boss, if not be one step ahead of him. He should be constantly looking for a way to improve. If the boss has a propagator like this, I don't know about asking for a wage rise, the boss should be afraid to lose him . . ."

"I feel from experience that the growing staff on a nursery is undervalued and underpaid when compared to the office staff.

When our own company will not give growing staff the status they deserve it's not surprising that the general public see us as "gardeners". As long as our pay is low we will not attract better people into the industry so we will not improve our efficiency or our image and so we will not be able either to pay higher wages or increase the price we ask for our product."

"For me the attitude of the leaders in our industry to propagators was shown recently when I applied to be a member of the Institute of Horticulture. After 25 years propagating I could only be an associate rather than a full member."

That perhaps puts it into a nutshell.

Before moving on it is relevant to mention that one of the questions asked: "What are the top five motivating elements attached to your job?" The returns produced the following results:

Unanimously, No. 1 was: job satisfaction; No. 2 was: the challenge of rooting; No. 3 was: seeing crop looking good; No. four was equally: improvement of techniques, being a member of the team, having full responsibility, seeing targets achieved and wages. No. 5 was: freedom and ambitions achieved.

It is obvious that something must be done to improve both poor and inadequate training programmes in colleges and at work as they relate to propagation.

*It is obvious that there are too few top propagators available and sadly some of these are keeping their secrets to themselves and not preparing the next generation for taking over.*

I cannot see the recent trends being reversed and there is nothing for the young person to aim at. Boring propagation may be at times, but well paid is hardly the description. We must appeal to the best young people.

Can we learn from abroad? Well, perhaps. I spent time with André Briant in June and he talked of real differentials on his nursery. Full time experienced nurserymen receive around £8,000 per year and André's heads of department earn double that. I wonder if there is a connection? Good wages, at least with Briant, equal success.

U.K. models are harder to find. There are glimmers of hope but not among the giants. John Newington, whose nursery I admired and took as a model for my own several years ago, tells me his basic wage is now £150 plus bonuses. Quality on the nursery is matched by good sales and an involved and motivated staff. The place has what I call a "good atmosphere" when you visit.

Stewarts' Nurseries in Winchester have established a good young team with all the key workers motivated and enjoying a 40 per cent differential in wages over regular staffers. I was impressed there with David Millais whose comments I did not include because time precluded it, but he spoke so well of his 29 year old boss. He felt motivated and part of a "young team going places." It contrasted

sharply with the depression I felt after so many of my interviews.

I would like to see propagators take a pride in their worth and stop being 'deferential workers'. Nurseries are nothing without their propagators, they represent the first link in the chain. But I have an abiding impression of a group of key workers perpetually cap in hand, unable or unwilling to assert themselves.

Propagators, what are you worth? Do your own home work and establish what you contribute to the success of the company you work for. It is no good sitting on the sidelines feeling overlooked and unappreciated.

There are a number of medium sized nurseries developing successfully around the country and run by market-oriented and development-minded men and women. On the whole they come into horticulture from other fields and have brought with them a clear understanding of the job they wanted to do. They know they can't do it alone and they know they must be surrounded by keen, enthusiastic, knowledgeable, and, of consequence, well-paid managers on every level. They are not afraid to pay good wages and not afraid to ask for more than 100 per cent effort but it's my impression those nurseries are getting on, doing an honest job, setting new standards and shaping attitudes for the next generation. I would commend you all to seek this team spirit and recognize the energy and inspiration that can come out of it.

## **NOT TO THE COLLEGES—ANYONE?**

PAUL LABOUS

*Merrist Wood Agricultural College, Worplesdon Guildford Surrey  
GU3 3PE*

Recruitment for the National Diploma in Nursery Practices course is declining at Merrist Wood College, and at other county colleges with similar courses. The number of students enrolling for certificate courses in nursery practices is also falling, although not quite so dramatically.

In contrast to this, courses in arboriculture, landscape, and countryside recreation at diploma level are oversubscribed.

The question may well be asked, 'is this a true decline or only a decline in comparison with the 1982 and 1984 peaks?' If the decline is a real one, then why is it that young people fail to see the prospect of a worthwhile career within the nursery business? Do they not realise that someone has to propagate the trees which are to be climbed; the 'soft' landscape material which is to be planted, and the forest species which are to play such an important part of leisure and recreation in the future?