

## Quality Assurance to the Customer of Pot-Grown Liners

**David Hutchinson**

17 Purkess Close, Brownhill Road, Chandler's Ford Eastleigh, Hants SO53 2ED Great Britain

### WHY THE NEED FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE?

The propagation, growing, and marketing of plants for garden and environmental planting have seen many changes. The customer is tempted to purchase plants with eye-catching sales promotion displays and makes that vital purchase on impulse and not necessarily by experience. The garden plant buyers and managers, many of whom have trained and been recruited from the food and retail side of the large corporate businesses, are familiar with quality management systems. They demand complete assurance that the supplier provide on a set date a specific quality plant.

These trends are set to continue which in turn presents the propagator, the nursery grower, and the supplier with new challenges and standards in order to be successful in supplying the market.

A small group met in December 1994 to develop a system to demonstrate their commitment to supplying the customer with consistent quality and service. The group of five primary liner growers formed the Association of Liner Producers.

### THE OBJECTIVE OF THE ASSOCIATION

The objective is to improve the sales and marketing of liners by overcoming the diversity of quality found in the pot-grown liner industry. In addition, they act as a forum to voice their views on matters affecting their industry such as quality standards, research funding, and promotion and marketing. The Code emphasises the need for high quality plant production and customer care that also complies with chemical, pesticide, and health and safety legislation.

### THE CODE OF PRACTICE

The Code of Practice demonstrates to the customer that the Association members are growing crops to a consistently high quality standard with due diligence to meet legal and environmental requirements. Compliance with the Code ensures that quality plants will be grown to uniform standards. The Code of Practice is divided into five sections: (1) plant quality, (2) nursery hygiene, (3) plant health, (4) customer relations, and (5) management systems

#### 1) Plant Quality.

**Specifications.** Specifications were established by the members studying customer's requirements. They include plant size, shape, and the number of breaks.

**Naming.** All plants must be true to name.

**Root Quality.** The roots must be alive and active. At the point of despatch all plants must have a sufficient quantity of active roots to hold the root ball intact.

**Nutrient Status.** The nutrient status of the compost must be sufficient to provide adequate nutrition throughout the life of the crop. It must also have some residual life. The plants must not appear starved.

**Labelling and Cultural Information.** Plants must be correctly labelled with a minimum of one label per unit.

**Nursery Hygiene.** The nursery must be free from sources of infection, i.e., pests, diseases, and weeds.

**Incoming Plants.** Plant material entering the nursery must be thoroughly examined for any signs of pest, disease, or weed. Quarantine immediately any doubtful consignments.

**Resources and Materials.** Growing media and containers must be stored in a manner to minimize the risk of contamination. Water sources and water tanks must be covered and free of waterborne diseases.

**Vermin.** Mice, rats, and rabbits must be kept under control within the nursery using legal methods.

**2) Plant Health.** A nominated staff member must be responsible for plant health monitoring and the control systems. They must be able to recognize common pests diseases and weeds.

**Monitoring.** There must be an effective system for monitoring pest, disease, and weeds levels. Inspections should be carried out weekly and the observations recorded. Any notifiable pests or diseases identified must be reported.

**Information Exchange.** Knowledge of information regarding pests, diseases, or weeds is exchanged between members.

**Pests and Diseases.** All plants must be visibly free from pests and disease. Where biological control is used, pests may be present, providing they are in balance with the control agents.

Specific pest: *Otiorhynchus sulcatus* (vine weevil), this serious widespread pest demands that all plants receive preventative treatment. The nursery must have an overall strategy for long-term control. If there is any change in the control procedure then the customer must be notified.

**Weeds.** Plants must be free from live weeds. Dead weeds are allowed, provided they do not detract from the overall appearance.

**Traded Stock.** It is the member's responsibility to inspect all traded stock.

### **3) Customer Relations.**

**Order Acknowledgment and Processing.** Each nursery must have a system to monitor the progress of an order from arrival to despatch and invoicing. This must be available for inspection. All orders must be acknowledged within 2 weeks of reception.

**Losses and Shortages.** All losses or shortages are to be notified to the customer at the earliest opportunity.



**Substitution.** The substitution of varieties/cultivars must only be carried out with the agreement of the customer.

**Complaints.** All members must operate a complaints system. A senior person must be nominated to deal with complaints.

**Delivery and Transport.** Customers must receive notice prior to delivery.

Plants must not be in transit for more than 4 days.

It is the producer's responsibility to ensure that plants arrive at the customer's site in good condition.

The producer is responsible for goods lost in transit. Any disputes with the haulage company are settled by the producer.

**Packaging.** There should be adequate space for the plants so that damage in transit is avoided. There should be no crushing, obvious damage, or excessive bending in transit.

#### 4) Management Systems.

**Health and Safety.** All members must have an updated policy statement, which complies with all the legal requirements.

**Food and Environmental Protection Act (FEPA) Requirements.** All FEPA requirements must be met. The records required for the use and storage of any pesticides on the nursery must be kept for inspection.

**Control of Substances Hazardous to Health (COSHH).** The assessment must be up to date and complete. It must be reviewed annually and constantly updated as "new" substances or working practices occur.

**Environmental Policy.** There should be a written environmental policy statement, It should consider the use of peat and its alternatives. The use of recycled water and recyclable materials is encouraged wherever possible. Members must comply with the current legislation regarding the disposal of waste materials/products.

#### **Inspecting the Code of Practice.**

- **Inspection visit.** The visit is carried out by a suitably qualified independent third party appointed by the Association.
- **Timing.** Twenty-four hours notice is given prior to inspection. Presently each nursery is inspected once during the growing season at a time when liners are being despatched.
- **Inspection criteria** — A balance is struck between:

Quality of plants at point of despatch;

Quality of plants growing on the nursery;

Nursery hygiene and business practice.

The nursery must demonstrate that it has effective systems in operation to meet the customer care and nursery management requirements.

- **Liners ready for despatch.** At least 20 cultivars/types of liners must be available for inspection at the time of despatch.
- **Specification.** Plants should be at or above the specifications in the A-Z Association Manual.

- **Grading.** Plants must be even throughout the batch and labelled accordingly.
- **Balance.** Plants should be sturdy and well balanced with substantial breaks of equal weight. Root and shoot growth must be in balance. The plants should be fit for their purpose (i.e., quickly growing into a finished plant).

***Growing Crops of Liners in the Nursery.*** All growing crops of liners are inspected. Crops will be inspected for pest, disease, and weed levels and also for vigor and other likely problems. Consideration is given to the overall appearance of the crop (i.e., leaf color, nutrition, root growth) and root loss caused by over or underwatering and possibly old pest or disease damage.

***Nutrition.*** Plants must not appear starved.

***Watering at Despatch.*** They must have sufficient water for transit and not be dry.

***Root Quality.*** There should be sufficient root to hold the root ball together when knocked out of the pot. The roots should be alive and active.

***General Appearance.*** The plants should have a good overall appearance. They should appear vigorous with strong growing shoots.

They should be correctly labelled with at least one label per unit. Labelling should be carried out in such a way that it is easily understood by the customer.

***Pesticide Application Records.*** Should be up-to-date and correct. In addition, to see that they are applied and recorded.

***Roads and Access.*** Are inspected for freedom from weeds.

***Rubbish.*** The nursery should be free from rubbish, discarded materials, and other items which would harbour harmful organisms that may cause problems with plant quality.

***Compost Storage.*** All compost materials should be stored in a manner which minimises the risk of any pests, diseases, or weed contamination.

***Water Storage.*** Water will be stored in a way to minimize pest, disease, or weed contamination.

***Pest and Disease Monitoring.*** A system must be operated where crops are inspected on a regular basis. Records should be kept and be available for inspection.

***Order Processing and Customer Care and Delivery.*** Systems must be in place to ascertain their effectiveness. Relevant documents and records should be kept for at least 12 months.

***Order Reception.*** A nominated person should be responsible for recording the reception of an order and to ensure that it is acknowledged and processed.

***Order Processing.*** All orders will be acknowledged and completed within 14 days of receipt. This is usually in writing, but can be verbal if recorded in writing and dated.

There should be a satisfactory system for notifying customers of shortages and omissions.

**Delivery.** To ascertain whether liners are arriving within the time scale indicated, there should be a system whereby customers sign and date a delivery note at the time the goods are received.

**Complaints.** There must be a satisfactory complaints procedure in place. All complaints should be logged and any action noted.

**5) Management Systems.** All systems should meet the legal requirements of all nursery businesses. The Inspector will inspect the documentation for:

- Health and safety policy statement
- Up to date COSHH assessments
- Risk assessments
- First aid facilities
- Accident book
- Accident and emergency procedures

Failure to adequately fulfil any of these legal requirements bars applicants from the membership of the Association.

### **WHAT IS THE RESULT?**

In the 2 years that the scheme has been operative, all the members have found that customer satisfaction has increased. The interest and responsibility of the staff is more focussed leading to a reduction of complaints and increased efficiency.

### **THE FUTURE**

Never before have garden/environmental plants been so popular and in demand. The market needs to be assured that suppliers can satisfy the demands of the customer.

An Industry led Code of Practice is a way of demonstrating the nursery's total commitment to the customer.

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