

Sowing the seed for the next 100 years

Chris King, Wyevale Nurseries

Wyevale Nurseries was first founded in 1930 by Harry Williamson at a site in Hereford. This was further developed by his son Peter Williamson, who took the business forward into the later half of the century. The business is now in its third generation of ownership. Wyevale Transplants as a standalone business was established in 1987 when an opportunity was seized upon to replace the large volumes of foreign imports with UK home grown stock. Wyevale Transplants was merged with the other companies within the Wyevale Group in 2014. Whilst only having been growing for the last 32 years, the business has been at the forefront of an ever ebbing and flowing Forestry sector. Nurseries are often at the sharp edge of any immediate downturn, driven by either a changing political, environmental or economic climate. The bonfires at the end of the season are not totally behind us as a sector.

The business dynamics have changed greatly over those years, in a horticultural sector which is often criticised for being slow to adapt. Currently over eight million plants are grown annually across a 91ha farm nestled next to the Malvern Hills



AONB near Ledbury, straddling the borders of Herefordshire and Gloucestershire. Its light sandy, red soils were eagerly eyed as perfect growing conditions for seedlings and transplants. However, the flat fields of the competing continental growers are not found, with slopes and steep ascents having to be negotiated at all stages of production. The area was once popular with growers, but due to changes in scale and aging work forces and with little sign of uptake from younger generations, Wyevale remains the only grower in the area. Production focuses on broadleaves for both the forestry sector and amenity markets where Wyevale Nurseries has a strong presence, across seedling and transplanted crops. Conifers increasingly form part of the mix, with crops grown on contract to ensure supply for larger schemes. This helps to stabilise some of the variances in customer demand from season to season, improving the environment for investment.

Investment continues to be made into

the business, with the biggest input coming in the form of new cold stores. This increases efficiency and allows for a greatly extended planting and selling season, making bare-root plants a more accessible option for customers whose time pressures on site need to be managed. The business runs a small fleet of five John Deere tractors, all specified to work with specialist nursery equipment, not usually seen in typical UK agriculture. The business employs eight full time staff, with numbers swelled during the busy season of October-May to a total of 28 staff.

Robotics

We look to the continent for inspiration in robotics, GIS mapping and GPS controlled implements, where uptake of new technology is far greater. All of these will help future proof a business that faces challenges in every area, especially labour, which until now has been largely made up of a transient migrant labour force. Brexit not only poses a tremendous challenge in any form, but an opportunity for those willing to negotiate it, particularly in a sector traditionally dominated by imports. The increased awareness of bio-security from both the private and public sector has sharpened the industries focus on the risk of dealing with imports, raising the importance of early stage contact with customers to ensure British sown and grown plant material.

Challenges are plentiful, with perhaps once of the biggest being a recruitment issue of the young into a sector which has a lot to offer. Tempting young, energetic individuals with a passion for growing and business away from more well promoted sectors such as agriculture will require a step up from all involved to ensure nurseries are not only well stocked with plants, but with people who are keen to provide the next generation of forestry material.

www.wyevalenurseries.co.uk

