

# LESSON 1 INTRODUCTION AND POSSIBILITIES

## INTRODUCTION

This short course is written as a guide for the person attempting to start or run a small nursery, herb or flower growing enterprise as a backyard operation on their larger property. It endeavours to include the most salient information and covers the most important topics you need to get you started. Use this course as a starting point: Study closely the nursery industry and its sectors in your region – see what is and isn't being done. Look at what plants and related products are currently in demand. Consider opportunities open to you - for example: if you want to propagate herbs for sale, you may also consider producing some herbal products; if you want to set up a small flower growing business, you might also consider making posies. Speak with appropriate government departments such as agriculture, forestry and other relevant authorities in your region; these places can help you with the detailed information you need to acquire that may not be covered here.

### Right Plant Right Place

Always remember that every plant is an individual. Ten different plants grown from the same batch of seed are different. They differ in their shape and growth rate, their disease resistance and their nutrient and water requirements. Bear in mind also that the same plant requires different treatment in different places and at different times of the year.

Whenever reading any book on gardening (propagation or any other discipline), consider where the author has gained his experience. Information in books is often regional and may not be relevant to your area - remember this when sourcing information.

Any plant grower is going to need to use several books for reference and it is important to know that the reference books are accurate. Once again consider the author, their background and their training. The most likely books to provide credible information must always be those written by people with solid academic training plus extensive practical experience in the subject. There are many valuable publications written by people who have only the practical experience.

Beware of books written by artists, journalists and engineers, who sometimes write gardening books simply because they're interested in the subject and happen to have the 'contacts' through writing on other subjects. A gardening book by an artist or architect can be a beautiful coffee-table publication, but in terms of accuracy for reference, can lead to disaster.

## PLANT CLASSIFICATION

Despite the fact that every plant is an individual, some plants do share characteristics to a greater or smaller degree, and they are classified on the basis of such similarities. Plants are known by both common and scientific names.

Unfortunately, the same plant can often have many different common names or many different plants can have the same common name. This situation has, in the main, made the use of common names confusing and often unreliable.

The confusion is not so marked with herbs, however - perhaps because of their long history of use - and herbs are often sold only under the common name, whereas most other plants are usually grown and sold under their scientific name.

Scientific names, being in Latin, may initially be more difficult to learn, but they are totally reliable.

Any one plant has only one scientific name. In this system, plants are classified by dividing them into groups with similar characteristics; these groups are then divided into groups with even closer similarities and so on.

There are seven levels of division:

- All plants are divided into several *phyla*
- Phyla are divided into *classes*
- Classes are divided into *orders*
- Orders are divided into *families*
- Families are divided into *genera* (singular: *genus*)
- Genera are divided into *species*
- Species are divided into *varieties* (naturally occurring varieties and cultivated varieties known as cultivars.)

When identifying a plant we use the genus and species names (and if applicable the variety) e.g. Eucalyptus (genus) camaldulensis (species).

Correct identification and labelling of plants is essential. Help with the identification of plants can be obtained from botanic gardens, university botany departments or your government herbarium (in most capital cities).

Note: you will often come across a botanical name with part of the name within single inverted commas - this means that this is a cultivated variety (bred by people not a naturally occurring variety) for example: *Lavandula angustifolia* 'Folgate'

If the name is all in italics and includes a variety name that is not within inverted commas then this is a naturally occurring variety rather than a cultivar.

For example: *Phyllostachys nigra* var. henonis is a naturally occurring variety of black bamboo.

You may also see the term subsp. (or ssp) this refers to a sub-species of the species in question (occurring in select geographical regions as a stable community of plants). Subspecies ranks above variety in botanical term.

## THE POSSIBILITIES

There are alternatives in running a business for example:

- The types of plants or products you choose to produce
- How you choose them i.e. through market research, current demand, current trends etc.
- How you will produce them
- How you will present them

## Suggested Tasks: ▼

*Throughout this course you will be provided with suggested tasks and reading to aid with your understanding. These will appear in the right hand column. Remember: these tasks are optional. The more you complete, the more you will learn, but in order to complete the course in 20 hours you will need to manage your time well. We suggest you spend about 10 minutes on each task you attempt, and no more than 20 minutes.*

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### Suggested Tasks

Look at the following plant names and work out what is the genus, species cultivar and variety names:

*Lavandula angustifolia*  
'Hidcote'

*Salvia officinalis*  
'Purpurascens'

*Cercis canadensis* var. *alba*

- Where you will set up your business
- How large or small you intend to be
- How often you review and add or subtract to your stock lines

Possibilities are diverse and to remain current and viable you need to revise your business and what you produce on a yearly or bi-yearly basis: products become unfashionable (even plants!) or new trends arise. Revising your business and keeping track of what is and isn't selling, what is current in the market place, determining new customer interest and demand keeps you in business; never let your business stagnate or your range become stale.

## FORM OF PRODUCT

Most plant growers (also referred to as 'green-life') specialise in one or two of the following products.

### Plants in Pots

This is the way the major part of the plant growing industry operates. The scale at which this sector of the industry operates makes growing in containers a low-risk operation compared with some other alternatives. Plants in containers do, however, become potbound and need to be sold or else potted up within a certain time.

### Plants in the Open Ground

Plants are grown in cultivated paddocks until ready for sale, at which time they are dug up and prepared for sale in various ways:

- they are put into containers
- soil is removed from the roots (deciduous plants only) and they are stored over winter with roots in moistened shavings or straw
- the soil ball is held together by tying hessian around it
- in some heavier soils, plants are sold with whatever soil clings to the roots left as such, not contained in any way by cloth or any other container

After container growing this is the next most common practice.

- Open-ground growing is economical in that it doesn't require the same expense for containers and usually it calls for less watering.
- It can be more labour intensive though.

### Bare Rooted Cuttings

Some nurseries specialise in propagation, that is producing roots on cuttings. They leave the job of growing the plants up to a saleable size to another nursery.

This type of operation requires less area but more expertise and a greater initial outlay on expensive propagating structures and equipment.

### Specialised Container Products

Hanging baskets, terrariums, bonsai mini-gardens and plants in decorative tubs are all products in which a nursery can specialise. Before commencing this type of operation however,

study carefully the demands of the market and know what competition exists.

You also need to be sure you know how to produce your product and how to produce it well. Anyone can make a bonsai but it takes skill to make a good one which will survive.

### Value - Added

As suggested earlier, some businesses in the nursery trade produce more than just plants - for example herb growers often run herb farms or have herb gardens that are open to the public. Alternatively they may produce herbal products to sell at market or online. Or they may do both.

There is a definite growth in demand for such things as dried herbs, teas, oils, candles and pillows. Compared to the broad nursery industry, however, this industry is minute. You should be careful about depending too heavily on this type of operation. It is more sensible to start as a sideline and grow, than to throw everything you have into producing a line of herbal products.



Plants grown in the open ground may be sold in several ways including, as shown here, with a soil ball attached to the roots eg. bare rooted (Dahlia bulbs).

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### Suggested Tasks

Conduct an online search:  
A guide to bare-rooted plants.

Spend about 10 minutes researching the types of plants sold bare-rooted, when they are sold, how they are grown, treated and handled and determine whether they could fit into your nursery plan.





Herbal products such as cosmetics, herb vinegars, pomanders, and dried herbs for cooking are becoming ever more popular, but do not rely on them heavily at first - business may take time to build up.

## GROWTH STAGE

At what stages of the plant's development will you be handling the plant? The answer could be either one or a combination of the following stages.

### Propagation

The beginning of the plants life: seed is sown, a cutting is struck, bulbs are divided or a fruit tree is budded etc. This stage requires greater technical skill and, in some cases, more expensive equipment than other stages.

### Planting Out

The small propagated plants are put into pots, planted into the open ground or into some other situation in which they can be grown to a larger size. There is more difficulty at the beginning of this operation when the plants are moved from a pampered propagating environment to a harsher growing-on environment. As they become older, they harden and become more resistant to disease and environmental problems.

### Advanced Growing

This involves growing plants to a large size either in containers or the open ground. Though these plants might be hardy, this type of work is heavy and usually requires at least some machinery to handle the plants.

## QUANTITY

Things to consider:

- The type of labels you use: one with a photograph, printed or simply handwritten
- The type of container: biodegradable, simple solid plastic pot or better-looking plastic pot

- Whether plants are sold with a stake or trellis
- How often you need to prune plants to shape before sale to improve juvenility, longevity and appearance
- How long a plant is viable for sale (herbs for example often become rangy after flowering and would need pruning and re-potting)?
- Will plants which don't thrive be thrown out or still sold as a 'throw-out line'?
- Will plants which are pot-bound be sold or potted on? If you sell pot-bound plants you need to reduce the price and advise the customer accordingly.

It is not necessary to decide all these details at the planning stage, but you should formulate a general policy on quality. Having said that - your reputation is going to be enhanced by always selling quality plants and products; if you sell plants that are past their best the customer should know that this is what they are buying and can do so cheaply.

## SELLING

The first decision to make is whether your operation is to be wholesale (selling to retailers or resellers) or retail (selling direct to the general public). Retail operations are generally more demanding in terms of time, but give a better return per plant. A retail nursery, irrespective of the types of plants you sell, must be attended at the advertised opening times whether customers are there or not. A backyard operation is a good alternative to a retail outlet: you can open at times that suit you, you are not paying rent and can also sell at plant markets and farmers markets, through mail order, to landscapers and garden centres. You can also start small and 'grow' your business gradually.

However, no matter what business model you choose - it is difficult for someone running a one person operation ever to have time off for sickness or holidays. A retail outlet needs to

have someone there to open it and water plants; a wholesale operation may not need to be open but still requires a person to come in and take over watering, and depending on the length of time, other maintenance operations.

You should aim at growing your produce for a particular market. Consider the following alternatives:

### Retail Nurseries

Retail nurseries are those that offer their products and services directly to members of the public. Marketing techniques include:

- Shops such as garden centres or nurseries which concentrate on selling plants, or sections within other shops such as supermarkets, hardware stores and florists.
- Specialist nurseries that concentrate on growing one particular type of plant which is sold direct to the public from the nursery. This type of nursery may also sell plants wholesale.
- Mail-order. In the past, this was usually conducted through catalogues and magazine advertisements. Today, many nurseries invest in a website, and sell online.
- Trade shows, home shows, agricultural field days and other such events can be used as an outlet for plants.
- Market stalls such as those at craft markets, fruit and vegetable markets, etc. Some nurseries find regular attendance at a market can make a significant contribution towards sales. Markets may also be used on an irregular basis to clear excess stock.



A strong see through fence keeps plants secure, but visible from the street.

### Wholesale Nurseries (or Production Nurseries)

Wholesale nurseries usually sell products in bulk to other businesses. Marketing techniques include:

- Trade markets conducted by industry associations or private markets where producers can sell to retailers, landscapers and other industry people at wholesale prices. Members of the public are usually excluded, and the organisers of these markets usually charge participating nurseries a fee or commission, or both.
- Truck sales where a vehicle loaded with plants calls on retailers and usually sells direct from the truck. Some wholesalers use a smaller vehicle with stock samples to stimulate sales.
- Agents that take a commission from the wholesale grower to take responsibility for marketing the product. This method is only worthwhile if the agent can provide a greater return than if the product was marketing by the wholesale business itself.
- Online ordering and shipping or delivery. Wholesalers with a website can take custom orders online or discuss options via email, then arrange shipping, delivery, or pick up as needed.
- Sell direct to bulk users such as landscapers, councils, housing developers etc.

### Mail Order Sales

Sales are conducted either by advertising in magazines or by sending lists or catalogues to prospective customers through the mail or via email. This is a very popular way for specialist nurseries (in particular) to operate these days. You are not relying on 'walk-in' trade and not depending on farmers' market sales alone. Most plants can be sent successfully by rail, road or mail, but it is very important that they are packaged in a proper way to avoid damage and loss of potting medium.

### Pop-Ups and Market Sales

These involve setting up a temporary stand which you operate only when you have something to sell. This type of operation is usually small-scale, but can be a very worthwhile supplement or contribution as a part income. It is rarely, by itself, a satisfactory way to earn a complete income. It is also a good way to sell-off overstocked plants and to make yourself known to customers.

### Permanent Outlet

This is the most common, most demanding and most profitable way of conducting any type of sale. It is also the most expensive and set-up costs can be large. A small operator may choose to work from their own backyard. If you have customers visiting though you will in all probability need a permit to trade; in a suburban location this may not be granted. If you plan to operate from a small country property this may not be a problem.

### Truck or Van Sales

One of the most common wholesale selling methods is to make regular visits to a round of retail establishments in a

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### Suggested Tasks

Visit farmers' markets, roadside stalls and small nurseries in your region - speak with the owners. See what they sell and what people are buying. You can learn what may work for you, or it may open up an idea for a 'niche' market.