



Dingle Nurseries

This case study focuses on a large-scale wholesale plant and tree nursery that is keen to expand its local supply chain to reduce its reliance on imported stock.

Background / Overview

“The Dingle” was a traditional hill farm which diversified into horticulture in 1968. Based on the outskirts of Welshpool, Powys, Dingle Nurseries now extends to around 160 acres (65 ha), growing a full range of plants for the amenity and wholesale markets. In addition to the wholesale nursery – the focus of this particular case study – the business also incorporates a retail nursery, café, garden centre and farm shop.

Of the 160 acres (65ha) at the nursery site, 130 acres (53ha) are dedicated to open-ground tree storage, with an additional 30 acres (12ha) for container-grown stock. Of these 30 acres, 18 acres (7ha) are used for shrubs and 12 acres (5ha) for trees.



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Dingle Nurseries' main business is the supply of trees and shrubs to approximately 200 landscape architects and contractors. Although certain areas of the landscape trade have been affected by the recession and the financial cuts that have impacted on the public sector, in particular, there are still some areas of growth in the landscaping industry, specifically supermarket sites.

The nursery supplies a wide range of hardy stock with two million potted shrubs, conifers and herbaceous in 7,000 varieties; 50,000 standard trees; 70,000 feathered and three million forest trees. Some less common stock is also bought to order.

Demand for plants of local provenance is definitely becoming a more popular trend, but is still only a small part of the business at present, as there are few Wales-based landscape projects which specify local provenance. However, the nursery and its owners, the Joseph family, are particularly keen to substitute stock it currently imports with more Welsh-grown plants. It is actively looking to expand its range of local contractors, even willing to provide advice and assistance with training.

A large part of the business is focused on sourcing and distributing stock to landscape architects and contractors, with the majority of plants supplied by propagating nurseries in the Netherlands and Belgium. When importing plants, the Dingle Nurseries doesn't use agents, preferring to deal directly with the supplier. However, some of these nurseries trade in stock themselves, therefore up to 50% of plants from these suppliers may have been bought in from another propagator.

Plants imported from Europe are delivered by the suppliers' own haulier, usually arriving by ferry at one of the Channel ports, as transportation via the Channel Tunnel has become too expensive. Once delivered to the nursery, the business has an in-house transport team which concentrates on retail outlets, whilst wholesale customers are handled by a dedicated local long-term haulage partner, S.M. Davies Ltd.

Based on the outskirts of Welshpool, the current wholesale nursery site is admittedly not ideal, with lorries often travelling on narrow country lanes at unsociable hours, although lay-bys have been installed to help minimise congestion. The site is also fairly hilly, which creates problems for plants grown in pots and containers, so in recent years additional work has gone in to levelling the site and introducing terracing.

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Lessons To Be Learned

Product Choice

For the retail business, the main current trend is customer demand for quick-growing ground cover plants and specimen plants in ceramic pots for low maintenance gardens. For the wholesale business, larger-sized trees with girths up to 40 centimetres are very popular. Demand for plants of local provenance is a small but growing trend.

Most suppliers used by Dingle Nurseries are chosen because they have established a good working relationship which has been built up over a long time. The business is very open to receiving approaches from Welsh growers to be potential suppliers, providing they have the requisite knowledge and experience to supply substantial quantities of quality stock.

Supply Chain Issues

The majority of plants are supplied by propagating nurseries in the Netherlands and Belgium. To make importing cost-effective, it is important that all delivery vehicles are fully-laden to bring down the overall unit cost of transport. Waste is also an issue. While current levels of waste on imported plants are low at 3%, this is still significantly higher than the 1% for locally-grown plants. If the wastage on imported plants could be reduced to the level of locally-grown plants then this would impact favourably on profitability.

Ideally, the nursery would prefer to increase the proportion of locally-grown compared to imported plants. Agronomically, many of the plants the nursery supplies are suitable to be grown locally. Using local provenance trees, for instance, would be advantageous as they are far more likely to thrive in the local conditions and be in keeping with the local landscape. Such advantages of using locally-grown plants have been acknowledged for some time, with agencies such as the Countryside Council for Wales and the Forestry Commission, now amalgamated into the Natural Resources Wales organisation, actually specifying their use as a condition of grant awards. Consequently there is an increasing demand for native trees grown from locally-collected seed.

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Costs And Value-Added Within The Supply Chain

After plant purchases and staff wages, logistics is Dingle Nurseries' next biggest cost, with transport representing 5% of total expenditure, although this isn't surprising considering distribution is the business's principal enterprise.

For the wholesale business, added-value arises when plants are grown-on at the nursery. There are, however, added costs involved with this, especially labour and irrigation, so the wastage percentage can rise above the overall average from 3% to 5%. Dingle Nurseries also provides added-value by acting as a one-stop-shop for customers, and through its exceptional contacts within the trade, is often able to source hard-to-find varieties.

Supply Chain Improvement In Wales

Although demand for local provenance plants is small, it is a growing trend. Government policy could increase demand, for example by specifying the use of local provenance in public planting schemes. This already happens to some extent in agri-environment schemes (AES) such as Glastir where, for example, participating farmers are required to use local provenance when planting hedges.

There are tangible opportunities for more Welsh growers to supply Dingle Nurseries and similar businesses, in particular to grow-on plants that are suitable for Welsh conditions. However, to supply large-scale nurseries such as Dingle Nurseries, growers need to be able to supply significant volumes of stock to strict quality specifications, therefore require the relevant technical knowledge and training. While the Dingle Nurseries doesn't have the resources to train growers themselves – although its team is more than willing to provide ongoing advice and support – there may be opportunities for links to be made with external educational and training organisations such as Glyndwr University, Coleg Cambria, Lantra, and Farming Connect.

For a sourcing and distribution business, location will always be a hugely significant factor. The Dingle Nurseries has developed in its particular location as a result of farm diversification, and in many ways has succeeded despite its seemingly unsuitable site. Any new enterprise would be well-advised to examine the issues of location and communications very carefully, as transports costs are likely to continue to rise, with the greatest impact being felt in less accessible rural locations.

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