



Ian Sturrock and Sons

This case study focuses on a fruit tree nursery that has concentrated on producing popular heritage varieties. Making the most of its online presence and its engagement with customers, the business now exports to a number of international locations from its base in North Wales.

Background / Overview

Ian Sturrock and Sons is a company that specialises in the growing and propagating of fruit trees. Growing rare, organic fruit trees for more than 30 years, its nursery near Bangor in Gwynedd comprises more than 4,000 Welsh provenance trees of 40 plus different varieties, from apples and pears through to plums and damsons.

Business founder Ian Sturrock is closely involved in the preservation of fruit trees native to Wales and he works to rescue and restore orchards and apple trees. He is responsible for the propagation of the last remaining Bardsey Island apple tree and for rescuing the Diamond apple.



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The company has three main sales outlets: wholesale to garden centres, retail sales direct from the nursery, and online through its website. The proportion of sales is currently fairly evenly shared between the three, however online sales have increased four-fold in recent years, which has led to an evolution in the firm's customer base. Buyers from South Wales have increased in numbers, as have international sales to countries including the United States of America, New Zealand, Ireland, and Denmark – one of the more unusual orders even came through from a monastery in Lebanon.

The main product driving this increase in sales has been the Bardsey Island apple tree, but demand for other Welsh fruit trees is growing too. The Bardsey Island apple tree provides a medium-sized eating apple – described as sweet, juicy, and with a unique lemon aroma – from an original mother tree discovered on Bardsey Island. Bardsey Island, or Ynys Enlli, is located off the tip of the Llŷn Peninsular in North Wales. The island was an important place of pilgrimage and monastic settlement throughout the Middle Ages, possibly from as early as the sixth century. A single, old, gnarled tree was discovered near to the remains of a thirteenth century abbey in 1999. The reputation and popularity of the tree has grown phenomenally over recent years, thanks to its association with a number of claims: it is “the rarest tree in the world”; it is “all that remains of the monastic orchard”; and it is the “only apple variety from the Celtic Welsh heartland”.

Ian Sturrock and Sons does not have an extensive marketing budget, relying on word of mouth, reputation, and appearances at shows and events to promote its products, which the popularity of the Bardsey Island apple tree has certainly helped with.

One particular characteristic which has undoubtedly boosted the business's growth is its open approach to customers, for example, using the on-site nursery apple press machinery to press customers' apples for them. Similarly, the Ian Sturrock and Sons website shares the extensive horticultural knowledge held within the business through a series of technical guidance documents and information videos spanning a vast array of topics, including fruit tree selection and root stock selection. The website also includes a message board which offers a customer support mechanism and a further access point for sharing and obtaining information.

Ian Sturrock and Sons' fruit tree collection is the result of many years efforts to propagate and cultivate the tree grafts successfully, resulting in crops that are highly resistant to disease, that ripen well in cool and cloudy Welsh summers, and that bear fruit which doesn't blow off in Welsh autumn gales.

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This process of trialling different methods of propagation involves grafts being sent to Ian Sturrock and Sons from a variety of sources. These grafts are propagated and included in research and development trials at the nursery, with information from customers often incorporated into the overall development process. Successful trial material is forwarded on to the National Fruit Collection at Brogdale in Kent.

Where possible, the company propagates and grows all its fruit trees in pots, and the potted trees need to be sited on flat land. For this reason, the damson and plum varieties are not grown at the nursery site in Bangor, but at locations elsewhere, as they tend to prefer to be grown in outdoor beds.

All fruit trees grown by Ian Sturrock and Sons are grafted on to a root stock which determines the eventual size and characteristics of the tree. The type of root stock used depends on the environment in which the tree is to be grown, and the size of the tree or specification for the ultimate size of the tree. Customer demand to date has been primarily from North Wales where the environment tends to be particularly windy, so the trend has been for smaller trees which tend to be more tolerant to wind exposure. Around 2,000 root stocks are ordered annually at a cost of approximately 80p each. These root stocks are delivered in bundles of 50, wrapped in plastic and delivered by articulated lorry during the winter. Root stocks are potted up during winter in compost in one of the nursery's four polytunnels. At this time, the sap moves down into the root stock. The tree grafts, meanwhile, are stored either in a refrigerator or in sand. This process helps to keep the graft wood in a dormant state.

All trees are delivered first class by Royal Mail or overnight courier. Pot-grown trees can be collected by customers direct from the nursery, as they are only 4-5ft long and therefore easily fit into a car. The Royal Mail charge on a per weight basis rather than by distance, so the heavier consignments go by courier and the longer, lighter consignments by Royal Mail. A £9.99 charge per tree for delivery is imposed, irrespective of whether the tree is being delivered to customers within the UK or abroad.

Garden centres tend to order two-year-old trees which are delivered by courier. The cost of pallet delivery varies depending on the size of the order, although the standard pallet cost is £60. Ian Sturrock and Sons will deliver directly themselves to garden centres in North Wales, combining two or three garden centres into a single trip to save time and money. The company doesn't use any form of distribution hub, nor does it coordinate deliveries with other local companies, as these facilities are not available in the area.

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Lessons To Be Learned

Product Choice

This business has identified a demand for heritage varieties of fruit trees, for instance the Bardsey Island apple. The Welsh heritage and the rareness of such trees offer excellent USPs that the company can capitalise on. Similarly, commercial value is added because of the reduced need for pesticides and associated pesticide management compared to other trees, as the trees Ian Sturrock and Sons produce are disease resistant and extremely tolerant of inclement weather.

The introduction of other discovered heritage varieties has allowed the business to expand without becoming overly-reliant on one rather unique product.



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Supply Chain Issues

Fruit tree selling is a very competitive market, and when selling to garden centres in particular, Ian Sturrock and Sons is often competing against mass produced trees which can be produced more economically, in countries such as Holland.

Costs And Value-Added Within The Supply Chain

It has proved most profitable to sell trees online using payment systems such as Pay Pal.

Supply Chain Improvement In Wales

The vast majority of garden centres currently supplied by the business are located in North Wales, an area where logistics and distribution systems are fairly limited.

The provision of land and storage is restricting the business's development at the production stage, a challenge that has become increasingly pressing as it has expanded over the years. This expansion is due in no small part to the value of Ian Sturrock's knowledge and experience in cultivating rare and unique fruit trees. He is now regarded as something of a national expert and is regularly asked to write articles and be interviewed by both regional and national media.

"Apple day" stalls are held across North Wales during October and November, which has provided ample opportunities for Ian Sturrock to share his vast knowledge and experience as a paid consultant who presents at these events and is on hand to offer advice to attendees. The popularity of these apple days, and other indicators of demand for locally-grown apples, apple juice and cider in particular (see the growth of the Welsh Perry and Cider Society), suggests that there are ample opportunities for the development of supply chains in apple product development across Wales.



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