

Characteristics of the Nursery Industry

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Nursery production of ornamental plants is a very specialized and intensified form of agriculture. The small producer may be owner as well as operator of the nursery. In order to be successful, nursery professionals must have a basic knowledge of propagation, fertility, irrigation, potting media, plant growth characteristics and pruning, construction and maintenance practices for greenhouses, shade structures, winter protection frames, pest control practices, business management and marketing. In larger operations key individuals or groups may be assigned a single area of responsibility.

Unlike agronomic crops, where expenditures and profit are figured on a per acre basis, nursery crops expenditures and profit are figured on a per square foot of growing area or on a per plant basis. Since nursery managers deal with much smaller but higher value production units compared to other agricultural crops, there is little room for error or failure if a profit is to be made. In effect little mistakes can be expensive when inventory values are \$50,000 per acre or more.

Production of nursery crops involves growing a wide range of plants with diverse cultural requirements. In one nursery, many species and cultivars of trees, shrubs, vines, coniferous evergreens, broadleaf evergreens, deciduous shrubs, perennials, grasses and bedding plants may be produced. A single nursery may grow only a few types or cultivars of crops or 200 to 1000 different crops. Such a large of variety of crops have different requirements for sunlight, water, fertilizer, pruning, winter protection, shipping and sales methods. Learning how to group various crops that have similar requirements is a challenge even for the most experienced nurserymen. The product mix always continues to change as new cultivars are introduced and old crops lose favor and market demand. Nursery professionals must always continue to experiment with new crops to determine if they fit into their production system. A key to success is flexibility in production, management and marketing. Members of the nursery industry enjoy their way of life, but the business must be profitable if their future is to remain in the industry. Life long learning is essential to be successful in the nursery business.

Opportunities to keep current are available through membership benefits of professional associations. Workshops, seminars, annual meetings, trade shows, newsletters, subscriptions to nursery magazines, journals and tours of nurseries are the best ways to invest in your future, your families future and your employees future.

Every year new people join the nursery industry and start a nursery business. Frequently inquiries for information are from people who already own land and want to generate income from the land. Except on a very large scale, traditional agriculture crops have yielded limited income in recent years. In contrast, the nursery and greenhouse industry has been growing very rapidly in acreage and farm cash receipts. However, the actual number of certified nursery businesses in North Carolina has remained about the same. Obviously, new businesses start each year and businesses fail each year.