

Profitable Perennials

bigger is better and better together

Perennial nursery Griffioen Wassenaar offers products and services that unburden retail and landscape customers during the growing season. Contrary to the industry's prevailing P9 pot, they choose to grow their plants in bigger P11 pots. These help garden retailers in keeping perennial sales steady, fresh, tidy and profitable while in landscaping the bigger pots allow plants to quickly develop lush and weed suppressing groundcovers.



The company's newly appointed managing director, Stefan Verbunt.



sales provide a steady source of income to a garden centre's business, amounting to 6 percent of its annual revenue. However, with the increasing pressure on supplying growers to keep the cost for the garden retailer down, it is not always easy to maintain healthy margins. Verbunt believes a mutually valuable relationship starts with reining in the pressure to reduce price. "Everyone grows their perennials in P9 with retailers relentlessly shopping around for a better deal. As a plant grower you find yourself at the beginning of the supply chain and, as such, constantly squeezed by retail. If there's a product shortage one year, the next season people produce like crazy to find out that prices are very disappointing resulting in business foreclosures in the most extreme cases. Bert Griffioen was fed up with this unhealthy business environment. While on a study trip to the USA, he saw the quarter gallons at plant nurseries, which more or less equals the P11 (1.4 litre) pots. Back in the Netherlands, he started to grow his first plants in square P11 pots. Nine years ago, he swapped the remaining P9 for P11 pots and, to date, Griffioen is unique in that we grow our plants in P11 pots only. These not only provide immediate impact, but also move off the retail shelf faster with fewer product losses."

IT'S NOT ONE SIZE FITS ALL

Currently the company operates from two production sites in Wassenaar and Boskoop, but not for long. An agreement has been reached with the community for the sale and transfer of the 6.5ha container field, office and packing area in Wassenaar to the Nature Conservation Society of South Holland in 2020. "Traditionally, Wassenaar was home to our landscape division which is set to relocate to Boskoop, where retail and landscape will continue to operate as separate entities from two different sites as a 'one size fits all' approach is impossible," explains Verbunt. He continues, "For landscaping purposes, for example, we grow a 'limited' 130 core varieties while for retail our product offering includes over 700 varieties. Our colleagues in landscaping often work on behalf of local authorities and councils to design, construct and maintain a range of green areas, involving long term planning, paperwork and lots of discussions with architects and garden designers. In retail, in turn, it is much more about well-oiled logistics, product variation and on time delivery."

BETTER TOGETHER

Wassenaar's change of location comes with a change in ownership.

In landscaping, Clematis x jouiniana 'Praecox' makes excellent ground cover.

Last September Boot&Dart Group acquired all the shares in Griffioen Wassenaar BV whose production currently stands in excess of 5 million units sold at home (70%) and abroad (30%). Verbunt: "Our products can be found in 80% of Dutch garden centres while abroad garden centre chains such as Plantasjen in Scandinavia are also among our customers." With regard to garden centres and perennial sales, Verbunt's adage is 'better together'. "I want my retail customers to earn as much money with my plants as possible. While our plants are the tools, increased profit margins is the ultimate goal. Long-term relationships are key in creating profitable perennials sales." According to the Dutch industry body for garden centres Tuinbranche NL, perennial

Hello Garden themed benches.



EXTENDING THE SELLING SEASON

Retail demand for perennials is known for being highly seasonal with around 75% of the product being required for spring sales, usually from late February onwards. "None the less, perennials in P11 pots continue to look particularly well in the second half of the sales season, contrary to their counterparts in P9 pots which can become droopy and floppy. So, they not only deliver value but also extend the selling season," notes Verbunt. In retail, the square P11 pots in blue (standard assortment), silver (niche products) and green (potted herbs) with curved label have now become the company's USP as they are used in a non-conventional way. "The time when consumers went shop-

Established in 1923, Griffioen Wassenaar is one of the Netherlands' leading perennial producers with a reputation for high quality plants supplying to the retail and landscape markets. In terms of marketing, the company is lucky to have Wassenaar - one of its production sites - incorporated in its business name, as this district of The Hague is dubbed the 'Beverly Hills of the Netherlands' with stately homes and mansions presiding over lush green landscapes. De Horsten Estate, for example, is just a few hundred metres away and was, until last summer, the official residence of Dutch King Willem-Alexander and his family.

HARD WORK AND DEDICATION

The company's newly appointed managing director, Stefan Verbunt, acknowledges that Wassenaar can conjure up images of luxury, high end and top quality, but underlines there's more than psychology to the brand's name. "What really matters is the hard work and dedication of all the people at Griffioen. We will always do everything within our power to grow healthy, well-established plants and to realise the very best yield for our partners in the supply chain. Former owner Bert Griffioen has a soft spot for polar bears and their strength. Their furry image continues to be featured on our plant labels albeit very modestly. Plant marketing, at the end of the day, is not only about

a company's values and image, it's also about understanding what these mean to a customer." The customer base of Hello Garden and GreentoColour Griffioen ranges from garden centre chains and DIY stores to landscapers, local authorities and garden designers. Verbunt attributes half of the company's turnover to income from garden retailers and the other half to landscape customers. "However, we sell more plants in retail and in landscape we undertake projects and offer a full range of garden design and landscape services including soil preparation, delivering plants and maintenance, all with their own margin. As such, revenues in landscaping and retail are created equally."

ping with an alphabetical list in their hand is over. Most consumers don't know what kind of plant they want until you start to seduce them and provide solutions. In a garden centre, a significant portion of sales come from impulse purchases so we broke with the traditional A to Z range presenting our plants by groups including, for example, butterfly plants, groundcovers, coastal plants, shadow plants and full sun lovers."

Increasingly, a range of 'unofficial' perennials such as alpines, grasses and ferns are added to develop sales opportunities beyond the traditional spring-summer period. "Hello Garden moves with the seasons, starting with Bergenia in early spring and finishing with Helleborus in October," says Verbunt.

INVENTORY RESPONSIBILITY

There's a lot of trust built between Griffioen and its retail customers. "Understanding each other's business doesn't happen overnight but ultimately it allows for streamlining the supply chain. Depending on the size of the garden centre business we recommend that operators use between 7 or 19 themed benches, each including ten different plants. In each theme 50 different genus are available which allows for keeping displays fresh, tidy and varied. Additionally, our two retail account managers, both with a proven track record in the garden centre business, position themselves as consultants to our retailers. This requires an impartial approach from our side, advising customers, if necessary, to take 8 instead of 10 benches as we don't want to eat away our customer's existing market share in, for example, houseplants. We are very proud that a number of major retailers have permanently outsourced inventory responsibility to us. Clean pots, good shelf life and well stocked benches are their primary prerequisites."

PERENNIALS WITH A PROMISE

While perennials in full flower may look tempting on the bench, Verbunt stresses that the company mostly sells perennials in the green



Colour blocking is one of the secrets to successful perennial display.

stage with flowers that are tight in the bud. "Our plants come with a promise. We want our plants to be beefy, putting all their energy in root systems and leaf growth allowing consumers to enjoy the flowers after planting. Most perennials bloom for four to six weeks. There are plenty of growers focusing on visually attractive plants in full flower, a risky undertaking as the garden market is very weather-dependent. Therefore, accurate and targeted POS, providing shoppers with a very clear idea of what the plant will look like in flower, is vital."

SUSTAINABILITY

Transparency in terms of the company's sustainability efforts is equally important, he continues. A high level of sustainability (and thus a minimal environmental footprint) is achieved through a number of operational practices, such as hot water weed control, banned neonics, biological crop protection, peat reduction and recyclable pots. The credibility of their environmental claims is evidenced in a wide range of eco labels such as MPS GAP, PlanetProof, GroenKeur and NL Greenlabel. Griffioen is particularly proud of being granted the permission to use the logo of the Dutch Butterfly and Bumble Bee Foundation. "As we don't procure plants from other growers we can truly promise our customers that no neonics are used on our plants." An important step towards sustainability is the effort made to reduce crop shrinkage. It is estimated

that at retail level shrink losses lie between 9 to 10 percent. "We grow on an as-needed basis, not on what we think will be sold. If this has been a bumper year for Verbena bonariensis sales, we will not set up a production of 100,000 plants for next year. The garden market is still a very traditional one, in some cases focused on the lowest possible purchase price with garden centre owners and retail chains buying on the auction clock. Of course, you can buy a truckload bargain but when you ask the supplier about shrinkage percentages they often have no clue. One of the values of the Hello Garden brand is that very few plants are thrown away once the plants have reached the retail environment. That's not only beneficial to the planet but also for the garden retailer's bottom line."

SPECIALIST PLANTS

To keep the Hello Garden plants flying off the shelves, retailers increasingly turn to niche type or specialist plants. Griffioen's response is its Specialty Range in grey pots. They come with an additional price as the starting material is obtained by expensive tissue culture techniques or is licensed plant material. Verbunt thinks that Geranium 'Rozanne' - bred by Donald and Rozanne Waterer at their Crooked Acre garden in the UK is one of the best breeding breakthroughs in perennials in recent years. "It has large leaves and flowers and continues flowering from June until the first frosts. Phlomis and Verbena bonariensis

are also riding the wave of popularity." When pondering over the amount of new plants which appear on the market each year with only a few making it into the second or third year, Verbunt is an advocate for a consumer panel to co-judge novelties at premier trade shows such as Plantarium. "Boskoop's Royal Horticultural Society, KVBC crowned Clematis tangutica 'Little Lemons' the best novelty new plant of this year's Plantarium show. There is nothing wrong with expert judges but the risk is that products are only assessed on their technical aspects instead of their consumer value and possible retail performance. Personally, I think yellow is not a very sexy colour in a retail environment and as such I am not sure whether this new Clematis will be a commercial success."

AMENITY MARKET

At Griffioen, plants are trialed and retriaged in the trial gardens to prove performance. "Smart plant breeders contact our company as they know we nurture relationships with retailers. In the amenity market (characterised by year round demand) customers also highly validate our trials. For example, as de-icing salt is an important factor, roadside vegetation plants must be tested in high salinity soils." Verbunt says salt tolerance is one

of the 21 criteria to which plants must respond to be included in the GreentoColour concept. "They should also be heat and drought tolerant; easy to mow; disease and pest resistant; non-toxic; dog, pigeon, rabbit and seagull resistant; and feature a compact and not-too-tall growth habit so they don't obstruct forward visibility." Only the highest performing plants are selected based on their demonstrated ability to thrive in the ecosystem without being overly aggressive or invasive. Landscape plants used according to the GreentoColour rules quickly develop lush and weed suppressing groundcovers literally weeding out perennials' fusty reputation of being high-maintenance. Tailored to meet individual needs of each landscape customer, a GreentoColour planting scheme ensures the right mix of product is sold in combination with a soil preparation programme where poor soil is removed and replaced with organic planting soil. "Another rule of thumb is the use of eight plants per m², that is plants with a well-developed root system in P11 pots. The subsequent maintenance plan includes short mowing of plants by the end of March to stimulate second buds forming and rejuvenates the plants along with mulching and pruning," concludes Verbunt.



For this perennial border Griffioen Wassenaar has chosen Hemerocallis, Verbena bonariensis, Rudbeckia, Echinacea and Helenium.



FACING THE CHALLENGES OF URBAN GARDENING

Kim van Rijssen works for Plantipp BV, a Dutch company specialising in royalty management. Kim spent eight years of her career in Beijing.

When I lived in the centre of Beijing, from 2009 to 2017, I made it my mission to transform my garden into a lush green oasis. But as my 'garden' was nothing more than a jumble of weeds, rubbish and broken tiles, my mission was not as simple as I'd first thought. None the less, my plan entailed two key steps; step 1: buy plants, step 2: buy garden soil.

Accomplishing step one, required travelling for an hour and a half by car or subway to the nearest garden centre. As I did not have a car, I took the subway. Four hours later I arrived home with not only as many plants as I could carry but also sore arms and drenched in sweat!

To accomplish step two, I knew that bags of soil would be too heavy to carry on the subway so instead I found an online supplier. The delivery cost, however, made this a highly expensive solution. As someone living in the centre of a city with a desire for gardening, I knew I would not be alone in facing the challenges of urban gardening.

Today I live in Brussels and again I have a small garden and no car. One major difference is that I purchase garden soil in my local supermarket but buying garden plants is still inconvenient and expensive.

Fortunately, times are changing. According to a report by Rabobank, 30% of all flowers and plants in Europe will be bought online by 2027. This is a positive trend for the horticulture industry and for me as a keen urban gardener. My next mission is to embrace modern consumerism and shop online for my Brussels' garden makeover.