

# As Seen in... the United Kingdom

By Jim Barrett

In May, **GPN's** consulting editor Jim Barrett spent a week in the London area touring nurseries and garden centers to gain insight into the nuances between the United States and United Kingdom markets.

The British are known for their classical gardens and old Victorian greenhouses that contain amazing old and important plant collections. Beyond that the British just like to garden and to visit garden centers. As one gentleman told me: "When I need to buy a birthday card for my wife, I go to a garden center" because it is a nice place to be.

In May, I spent a week in the London area touring gardens and nurseries (and a few pubs) with a group of University of Florida students and faculty. The folks at Ball Colegrave were nice enough to host our group and set up the commercial visits. Spring in the United Kingdom this year was early. Demand at garden centers has been very strong and things were busy. At all of our retail stops, retailers were apologizing for the way things "looked" because they were not able to keep the displays restocked.

In many ways, the U.K. garden centers looked like ours in the United States and carried a similar line of products. However, there were some key differences that I will attempt to illustrate here.

First, the general economic situation has not hit U.K. garden center business the way it has in the United States. For example, tree and shrub sales in England have remained strong. There are probably three main reasons. First, garden center business in the United Kingdom has not been tied as closely to growth in a housing market. Second, the British gardener is probably a more serious gardener and gardening is more important to their lifestyle. Third is the fact that U.K. garden centers have generally succeeded in becoming destinations. They are clearly differentiated from the mass-market discount stores.

Everyone we talked to, whether in wholesale or retail, made the same point that their business success was all about service to the customer



and giving the customer a good experience. The accompanying pictures illustrate some of the things being done in the United Kingdom to attract and excite customers. ☒

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#### FROM THE ROAD



Cafes are an important component of the better garden centers in the United Kingdom as can be seen by the menu board at Perrywood Nurseries. Also shown here is Squires ([www.squiresgardencentres.co.uk](http://www.squiresgardencentres.co.uk)), which has 11 locations around London. The cafe is part of providing a nice experience and leisurely attitude for customers. The food was good, but the afternoon tea and cake was great. Customers plan time for the cafe in their visit. One garden center manager indicated that nearly 20 percent of total revenue came from the cafe.



Green goods on display the U.K. way. Here are several examples of some of the creative and effective green goods displays found in garden centers in the United Kingdom.



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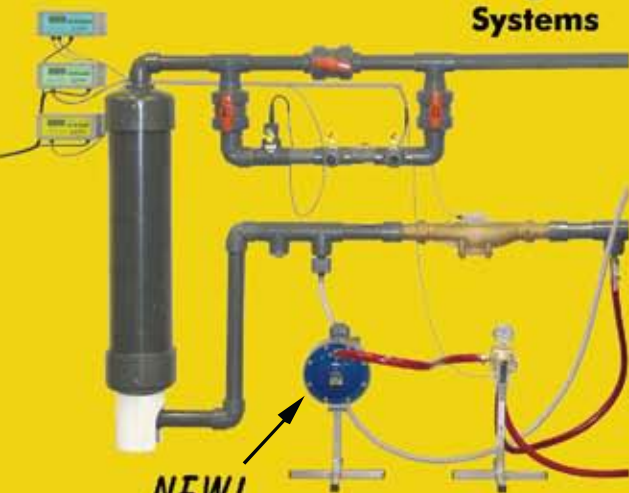
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## FROM THE ROAD



There is a running battle in England to reinforce the idea of locally grown. Every local product is identified as being grown in the United Kingdom. Part of this is to support the local economy, however, some of this effort is to reinforce the idea of local being better quality than the lower priced product imported from the continent.

Outdoor lifestyle products are important for most garden centers in the United Kingdom. At Perrywood Nursery, the display area is in the center of a quadrant so customers can walk through as they move between the entrance, checkout, hard goods area, outdoor sales area, indoor plants greenhouse and the cafe.



Coolings is very large and well organized. They have been selected for the second time as the outstanding U.K. garden center and make that well known throughout their displays and on their website. At the entrance is the big sign with their five-year guarantee on perennials. Coolings does very little direct advertising; they let word of mouth and the website ([www.coolings.co.uk](http://www.coolings.co.uk)) bring in new customers. The emphasis for generating more sales is through programs included in their newsletter. For example, on the day of the Royal Wedding, garden center business was non-existent. Coolings expected that would happen and had a program in their newsletter for baskets at 1 pound (~\$1.70) on that day. As a result, there were 1,000 customers in the store that would not normally have been there that day.



Notice that these plants do not have flowers, but also notice that the geraniums are moving faster than the store can restock. Gardeners in the United Kingdom are more accepting of no or few flowers on their plants at retail. Coolings uses the tag line "The experience is in the growing" to reinforce the concept.



In the center of London many businesses decorate with large hanging baskets and window boxes. Window Flowers ([www.windowflowers.com](http://www.windowflowers.com)) specializes in the niche products. They make production efficient by doing only a few different combination recipes. Plants are grown as 4-inch and the large baskets are put together as the plants start flowering. For the boxes, the container remains in place and is replanted two to three times a year. During winter, color is provided with pansies and fullness comes from vines or evergreen shrubs. Window Flowers sells the unit and then charges a weekly fee for maintenance. A trick is that the basket has a plastic liner that goes about half way up so it holds more water.

While plastic trays are used, polystyrene trays (packs) are very popular. We were told they are used only because the customers are so accustomed to them.



The British government is on record with plans to exclude peat from container substrates and especially in retail. There has been significant debate about this issue and much disagreement. All of the wholesale growers and retailers feel implementation is years away. A few are looking at alternative compost materials but most are not worried for the short run. This picture in the retail shop of a private garden was the only time we saw the issue affecting product positioning.

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