



‘Work hard and play hard’

Whetman Pinks is a small but internationally successful company that produces Dianthus cuttings: only pinks, no carnations. On top of that, they have a formal breeding programme and regularly launch new varieties. The business was established back in 1936. But it has grown especially in the last decade; since Mrs. Carolyn Bourne has been in charge. “The secret of our success is versatility, which allows us to adapt quickly.”

Eveline Thoens in conversation with Carolyn Bourne

The Whetman Pinks nursery is surrounded by wooded hills in a valley near the coast of southern England, with narrow winding roads framed by high hedgerows leading up to it. We sit at the large kitchen table with a pot of tea, and a view over the lovely garden and the greenhouses around the corner. Carolyn Bourne talks with great enthusiasm and pride about her nursery and her pinks.

"We are one of only four companies in the world specialising in Dianthus breeding", she says. She explains that pinks are often confused with carnations, which are in the same family and look similar, but have very different properties. "Pinks are drought tolerant and extremely hardy to heat and cold. They're easy to grow both for the grower and for the consumer. They are evergreen and have attractive grey-green foliage. Another important difference from modern carnations is their fragrance. People who buy flowers always smell them. If you do that with pinks, you are rewarded. We try to keep ourselves different by really focusing on growing flowers that smell nice."

Unusual combination

With its seven thousand square meters of protected cropping, Whetman Pinks sells five million cuttings per year to growers. Parallel to that they have a proper breeding programme, which is an unusual combination. "It's really like two separate businesses in one", Mrs. Bourne says. She recounts how the nursery was started by the Whetman family in 1936 as a traditional market garden, producing fruits, vegetables and flowers. "These were sold locally and also sent to London by steam train. I married John Whetman and joined the business in 1979. By then the nursery was only growing pot plants and cut flowers: pinks and freesia. When we later divorced in 2001, I bought John's share of the business. From then on I ran the nursery as a sole trader."

'Winning the Grower of the Year competition was a really big boost for us'



'The positive thing is that when cut flowers are not so popular, we can concentrate on garden pinks'

She explains there are many different species of Dianthus, one of which is referred to as carnation (*Dianthus caryophyllus*). "The pinks we grow, however, are a hybrid mix of several different Dianthus species, with smaller flowers, shorter stems and they're fragrant. We list over seventy different varieties, with different colours and heights: short ones suitable for rockeries and window boxes, intermediate height cultivars ideal as a patio pot or container plants, and herbaceous perennial varieties which grow up to 45 centimetres. The best varieties of garden pinks are the ones we recommend also for cutting."

Investing in research

Mrs. Bourne explains how the nursery went from growing cut flower to selling only young plants: "Back in the old days, we used to get together with the other local pink growers, to talk about things like cooperative marketing. And it so happened that in the eighties those growers asked us to propagate replacement plants for their cut flower crops. So then we started focusing more on propagating. Running parallel to that, a local postgrad student was researching a form of propagation called meristemming, by which you can free the plant

from virus. This was important because Dianthus yields were really diminished by an array of viruses. So that's how we got started on freeing all our stocks of viruses and investing in research." One day, they advertised in *The Grower* magazine to try to expand their propagating business. "Then somebody from Lincolnshire asked us to quote for 150,000 plants, and ended up growing about fifteen acres of our pinks. And once he started, several other growers around him started copying what he was doing and before we knew where we were, we had so much propagation to do that we ended up stopping producing cut flowers,



because it interfered with the mother stock. Then we started the breeding programme to introduce new varieties. Throughout the eighties we'd already been doing a bit of pollination, but not very scientifically. Some of the varieties sport quite freely, which means that occasionally mutants arise through natural deviation. Then in 1988 a neighbouring amateur pink breeder called Cecil Wyatt died and left us his seed collection. So by using sports, Cecil's seed and our own breeding we started introducing new varieties, which has eventually resulted in the elaborate catalogue we have now."

Pinks have mainly pink, red, mauve and white colours. Mrs. Bourne describes how they try to make new varieties with different patterns, for example stripy, and different colours, like yellow and orange. "These colours are really hard to breed, because they don't exist in pinks at all. So we're trying to cross with wild *Dianthus* species. This is a painstaking process, because you have to do many backcrosses to get rid of all the other wild traits and then often the desired trait also disappears again. So when you want to introduce something really different like this, it can take twenty or thirty years. But most of our breeding programme consists of simply crossing what we already have: try lots of different combinations and see what progeny you get. With that approach it takes about eight years to introduce a new variety, including three years of trials to test performance and two years to build up stock. We have four fulltime breeders working on this."

In order to stay at the forefront, the company tries to keep everything as modern as possible and

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move with the times. "We continually strive to improve our techniques. Much energy goes into keeping the plants free of six known carnation viruses, which are transmitted by aphids and humans. Plant tissue is tested twice a year, using molecular hybridisation. We have all kinds of protocols and procedures to prevent infections. For instance, nobody is allowed near the nuclear stock after they've been down to the greenhouses with the mother stock. Furthermore, we try to be as efficient as possible in everything we do. We apply the Toyota method of reducing waste in all its forms: movement, space, waiting time and so on." At the moment there are thirty-two permanent staff members and the average length of service is an impressive fourteen years. "So they know what to do", Carolyn jokes. "They have worked so long with me that they are almost like family. There is a really good atmosphere and they are very loyal. Last year we won an Employer of the Year award from a regional newspaper. My philosophy has always been that as we are expected to work for a living, you might as well make it enjoyable. Work hard, play hard. Compassion is important as an employer; you have to be understanding, let people take a time-out when they need one. I expect my staff to work hard, but rest is just as important. Once a year, we have an away-day so we can all relax together."

No staking and tying

The nursery's customers are wholesale growers, both in the UK and abroad, who are often supplying their own garden centres with the finished garden pinks, and then there are cut flower

growers who sell to florists.

Mrs. Bourne says it's difficult to persuade growers to grow pinks. "Many growers make the mistake of comparing them with carnations. But they grow quite differently. Pinks tolerate temperatures from minus twenty to plus thirty-five degrees, so they can be grown outdoors. Unlike carnations, pinks don't need staking and tying and they repeat-flower. For cut flower, pinks yield more than carnations: about a hundred stems during their productive life of about 1.5 years. Even though they grow best under glass, they don't need heat; so when gas becomes expensive, it will be an even more interesting crop to grow. There are still markets to be explored and that's what really gives me enthusiasm. I want to turn people on to this cottage garden plant."

One of the most important traits of pinks, their strong fragrance, unfortunately also has a downside. "The vase life isn't always as good as the carnation's, which has no scent. Now I'm trying to find new customers who can cut out the middle man and get the flowers into the store as quickly as possible, without going through the market. We can only give seven to ten days of vase life. Carnations have two to three weeks, at a certain point you have to start dusting them.'

She says expectations of quality and uniformity are much higher now than twenty years ago. 'Modern growers, especially in the Netherlands and Germany, would like all plants to grow to the same height and to flower at the same time, so that the space during transport or in the glasshouse can be maximised. This is very difficult, but we are looking into this in our breeding programme now.'

Privileged and rebellious

Carolyn Bourne tells how she's always loved plants. "I was a bit of a rebel child, I dropped out of school and started a market stall selling plants. I met John Whetman when I came to the nursery

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Carolyn Bourne talks with great enthusiasm and pride about her nursery and her pinks

to buy plants and one day I didn't leave. Later, when I was getting divorced at the age of forty and I thought I might lose the business, I went to train as a nurse. I loved it and I think it has actually helped me run the business. Being employed by the National Health Service, the largest employer in the UK, made me aware of budgets and how to treat employees. It really opened my eyes because I'd been a very privileged young girl. The clinical side is actually similar to the cutting business: the importance of cleanliness, attention to detail and being rigorous in protocols, particularly with the continuous threat of virus infection at the nursery. It's very much like a ward situation, where disease can be easily transmitted by poor hygiene. I also

gained insight into how to promote the welfare of your staff and their personal development and training, which is absolutely key to everything. You cannot expect people to do a good job if you don't train them."

She describes herself as ambitious and competitive. "I like to do what I do to the best of my ability and I like to get the best out of people. The secret of our success I think is versatility, because we're able to adapt quickly. I go around thinking 'what if?' so I prepare for the worst. 'What

would I do if my colleague dropped dead, what would I do if we got virus on the nursery?' I think about those things all the time and I make sure for instance that most people on the nursery can do the other person's job, so that the company is not reliant on any one person and the whole thing will keep going in the event of a catastrophe."

Having to adapt to changing markets poses a continuous challenge. "But the positive thing is that when cut flowers are not so popular, we can concentrate on garden pinks. And now that we're exporting, we can concentrate on Japan or Australia when things are bad in the UK. It's also very important to have a really good relationship

with your customers and suppliers. You need to talk to them, so that you hear what's in fashion. We see them at trade shows, we travel to their nurseries. We ask them how things are, what's selling, what the competition is, what colours are in fashion, whether they've had any problems, how we can help them. What I also do is go to garden centres, see what's selling, watch people buying; that is truly interesting."

Awards and prizes

"In 2002 we were doing much research and development, working closely with Plymouth University on topics such as vase life, shelf life and perfume capture and the business was growing quickly. We had some decent new varieties in a range called Scent First that we'd launched onto the market and were being well received. We had started exporting and the sales of our cuttings were increasing. So I decided to enter the Grower of the Year competition in The Grower magazine. And we won. That was a really big boost for us. This year, we entered the competition again and won again. I wanted to prove that we could still do it ten years on. And I'm really proud, because in that time a lot of businesses have failed or been bought up by others. Even though we're small, we still manage to stay at the forefront."



On top of that, they were awarded the Queen's Award for Enterprise for International Trade this spring. "We're very proud of that. It's a recognition of having contributed to the UK economy." The hardest thing in this business according to Mrs. Bourne is the protection of the intellectual property of the plant breeder. "People don't realise the expense that is incurred in developing a new variety. It takes us eight years to produce something new, with four fulltime breeders whose salaries we have to pay, and then you have to pay two thousand pounds per territory for protection. Since we're selling across the world, that's many thousands of pounds per plant just in registration fees alone. So you have to sell enough to get that

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money back. But if you don't register your cultivar in Asia, for example, anybody can go and buy one of our plants and put it in culture and sell it in Asia and we get nothing for it because we don't have breeder's rights there. I would personally like a one-off fee that would protect your variety around the world full stop."

She finds it a strange paradox that while all breeders keep developing new varieties, the choice available to consumers keeps reducing. "The consumer is having his choice narrowed by the commercial need to grow what is successful. Also because more and more companies are being bought up and amalgamated. It's now much harder for smaller growers like us to make a living because wholesalers are buying in such quantity that they are driving prices down, making it almost unprofitable to produce. I think that leads

to people growing only the stuff that you know is going to perform. Strangely enough, the market simultaneously demands new varieties all the time. It annoys me when just after it's taken us eight years to create a new variety, they ask me for yet another new one. I say: try this one first!"

Eye on the ball

How does she see the future? "Steady as she goes, keep your eye on the ball. Careful management, try hard

not to get distracted from what you do best, but keep your eyes always on developing markets. Be prepared to change if you have to. My personal ambition for the future is to be well-known and respected for the quality of the breeding and the product that we're producing. That it's a lasting legacy, for those varieties to still be in production in a hundred years' time because they're really good, that's what I would like."

About popularity, she says: "When something is in fashion, it will go out of fashion. So one place I never want my pinks to be is at the height of fashion. Every time I think they are going to get too fashionable, I stop advertising."