

THE ROBUSTNESS of Readyhedge

The Worcestershire based nursery continues to hedge against adversity with continuous growth over the last two decades



Back in 2016, when the UK voted to leave the European Union, Simon Williamson saw an opportunity for British nurseries. “We’re naturally good growers,” he said, and Brexit had the potential to create a more cohesive industry. Seven years on and Simon’s initial optimism is being tested.

The new Border Target Operating Model, which is being implemented over the next year, isn’t inspiring much confidence either for importing from the continent. “I can’t see how it’s going to work properly and how they’ll get the quantity that we import through in the time period,” says the founder of Worcestershire-based nursery Readyhedge.

“The season is coming up now when the country gets a lot of imports from bareroot transplants and rootballs, for example, and the risk to plants if they’re held up at these

new border control points could cause a massive problem.”

Then there’s the additional paperwork, the indecisiveness from government and the soaring costs associated with imports. Phytosanitary checks need to be carried out on either side of the border, adding further unnecessary and potentially costly delays. “There could be a lot of dead plants – who’s paying for that?”

It’s not just government, though, that is holding us back from grasping the opportunity provided by Brexit; it’s the industry-wide skills shortage. “We have

enough soil variables and expertise over here, but we’re limited on staff who can deal with it; they need a lot more training and for people to get into horticulture. We can grow virtually everything over here. But the Dutch are more innovative; they can do it cheaper, and they invest in mechanisation.”

We’re lagging behind, says Simon. “Nurseries have closed.

When I started in horticulture, there were so many other nurseries, but now nobody wants to go into horticulture and the land is being sold for development. We’re losing a lot of the expertise and children don’t want to carry on family businesses.”

Fortunately, that’s not the case at Readyhedge. Simon’s children, Toby and Jess, are both looking to take over the family business in the future. Slowly, Simon is relinquishing some of his tasks to both of them.

“It’s a feel-good business to be in, growing plants,” says Toby. “The government is setting up schemes to plant so many trees in so many years, and we’ve already been doing that for 20 years – producing plants and planting them in the ground. It’s a good business for the planet.”

And despite the hurdles of Brexit, it’s a profitable business to be in, with a recent tweak to its branding – including a new logo – showing its desire to adapt and look ahead.

“We’ve been fortuitous with the name Readyhedge – it’s like Ronseal: it does what it says on the tin. So, we didn’t rebrand dramatically; it’s just a simple font change.” It’s a reminder, says Simon, that Readyhedge is at



the forefront of hedging because that's what it focuses on. "It can have its downsides, because you're putting all your eggs in one basket, but it hasn't been like that for us. We've managed to forge through and expand over the last 20 years."

It produces around 50,000m of instant hedging each year, and around two thirds of this are sold directly to commercial clients but end up in a residential setting; its main clients are landscapers, garden designers and housebuilders.

"Hedging is always going to be needed," says Simon, and Readyhedge carved a niche for itself when it was first founded by introducing a product range that offered instant gratification. "We turned it into a whole system; if somebody ordered a metre of hornbeam hedging 10 years ago, it would be exactly the same to order now because we have a production system with no real variation year on year in quality. It's like it's come out of a machine."

But its well-oiled machine might get a bit of a shakeup thanks to the new peat legislation. The professional horticultural sector is expected to phase out peat by 2026 with some exceptions, followed by



a complete ban from 2030. Readyhedge has reduced its peat usage by 40% and is now working towards Defra's ultimate deadline.

Few have tried going peat free with hedging, though, so there's little trial and error to go by, says Toby. "We have had to do it ourselves and so, this year, we are doing a big peat-free trial."

Whilst all nurseries are striving to reduce and eventually eradicate their use of peat, there are concerns about less water retention when using peat-free alternatives.

"The world's biggest problem is water supply, and we will be using more water," explains Simon. And it's about a third more too, shares Toby.

Increased watering also results in more runoff, stripping fertiliser, so a higher concentration may need to be used – and prices of fertiliser have gone up, says Simon.



THE NURSERY FROM ABOVE

Schemes could become more expensive with the amount of maintenance required for plants growing in peat-free mediums too, he predicts.

It might sound like there's a lot for the nursery industry to contend with at the moment – and there is, there's no denying it. But Simon remains optimistic and is exploring plans to further enhance its main site in Pershore as well as to expand as the site has become "sort of landlocked".

Readyhedge already has contract growers in Oxfordshire, Gloucestershire, another site in Worcestershire, as well as sites further afield in Ireland and Holland. "But

at the end of the day, we make more money when we do it ourselves."

A new greenhouse is in the works at Pershore to prevent fewer deaths of less

hardy evergreen stock throughout the winter, after Readyhedge lost more than £100k of evergreen stock at the start of December last when the temperature dropped to minus 12°C, extreme temperatures seem slightly harder to predict.

Admittedly, the "halcyon days" of sales during the pandemic are over. But as

Simon says, hedging is always in demand, and by sticking to what it knows, Readyhedge is primed to meet this demand. readyhedge.co.uk

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