

Levington blossoms under new regime

Levington Horticulture has a new identity but it has a long pedigree.

A new company came into being two years ago. It was launched into a competitive sector of the industry at a time when the country had not quite shaken off the longest recession since the war.

An extremely brave decision one might think, but when you consider that Levington Horticulture was formed following a management buyout from the Fison empire and that the expertise and experience contained within the "new" company was among the finest in Europe you can see why investors had such confidence.

The progress of Levington Horticulture since then has done nothing to change any minds and its fortunes, like the natural recipients of certain Levington products, are blossoming.

At its Bramford headquarters, just outside Ipswich, the zeal and enthusiasm of the workforce is infectious and the staff talk of Levington and its many innovative new products in a way parents describe the achievements of their children.

"The new business is based on very solid and firm foundations. You also get decisions made quicker, as it is all done in the same corridor. You don't have to wait for them to go from board level to board level," said Paul Waller, Senior Product Manager.



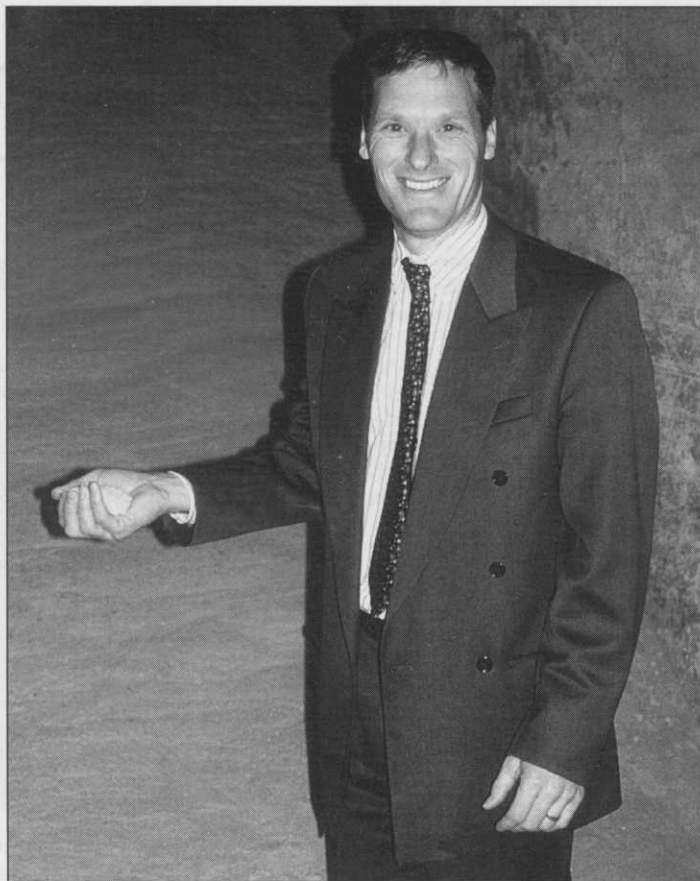
"That is coupled with the experience we have to ensure that we proceed with caution," he adds.

Levington Horticulture is a major player in European Horticulture selling around £50 million worth of fertilisers, composts, garden chemical and professional amenity chemicals a year.

A total of 250 people are employed at the main site at Bramford which manufactures and packs fertilisers and chemicals and the other plant near Doncaster in Yorkshire, which is the



At the heart of the matter: Inside a test site



Handing it to Levington: Steve Holton, Works Manager, with some base product

growing medium site where peat is extracted and compost manufactured for commercial growers and for the amateur market.

The opportunity for the management to liberate themselves and become masters of their own destiny came when Fison's needed to generate cash in the early 90s and put the Horticulture Division on the market.

"Thankfully there was a management buyout and it was the best solution all round. It retained the same team, same commitment, same plant, same product. It gave continuity," said Public Relations Manager Alan Shaw.

That team had been responsible for many major innovations over the last 150 years, since the 50s all developed at the Research Station in Levington – now you see where the company name comes from – 15 miles from Bramford.

The first commercially successful peat based growing medium – the Levington Compost range; the Gro-bag – still a multi million pound business in the retail market; the first specialist sports turf fertiliser developed as demand increased on sports facilities. They just trip off the tongue and are recognised milestones in the industry.

"The demand on sports facilities increased a need to feed and maintain these facilities and straight agriculture fertiliser was too concentrated and not ideal for maintaining turf. We, therefore, used the company's expertise in fertilisers to develop a granule which could be used reliably and efficiently to the point that it is used at, among others Wimbledon and the Wentworth Club – most European Tour venues use and recommend our products and our Greensmaster range has been granted the endorsement 'PGA European Tour Official Supplier' which is a testimony to our quality," explains Technical Services Manager Keith McKee, as he and Paul combined to ensure nothing was overlooked.

"When I was first working on the Greenmaster Range it was called the 'Greenkeeper' and was peat based. We were the business which revolutionised the supply of fertilisers to greenkeepers because it was a light weight granule of high concentration," said Paul, with more than a hint of pride in his voice.

**Kate Sudgen,
Product
Development
Officer on site**



"It was the first pinhead fertiliser granule. Previously it was large granules or powder and there was nothing in between. It was called Hi Lite - high concentration light weight. The plant which was there at that time was known as the Hi Lite Plant. The product outlived itself and we rebuilt the plant with a new formulation based on vermiculite but we still call it the Hi Lite Plant. It enabled people to treat high quality turf more effectively and efficiently to get good mechanical distribution."

Golden Key membership will allow Levington to expand its, already established, policy of talking to greenkeepers to find out what they want.

"One of main reasons we became a Golden Key member is that it is important to us, and always has been, to have a forum to discuss the greenkeepers needs and how technology can meet those needs. The sales call is not the most appropriate time or place for that and neutral ground is far better. The opportunities brought by Golden Key are ideal for that kind of interaction," explained Alan.

"We are involved with the European Tour which has allowed us to talk at its greenkeeping conference over the years. There, the greenkeepers, could be described as the creme de la creme and a lot of hot information comes out of the meeting and you tend to react to it. It is vitally important to talk to the people who do the job."

"We can sit and dream something up but it is the guys out there who know what they want," added Keith.

One of Levington Horticulture's biggest growth product has been Turfclear, a dual purpose product originally promoted as a fungicide with some worm cast control but now, as people have seen that it is an excellent worm control, its usage has grown and more people purchase the product for that purpose than as a fungicide.

"It doesn't contain carbaryl or chlordane and has probably quadrupled in sales in last four years," said Keith.

The company has the Royal Warrant as suppliers to Her Majesty the Queen but of equal pride to all concerned is the BS EN ISO 9001 accreditation.

"Many people have the 9000 accreditation but, in fact, are

accredited for just service and maybe manufacturing but 9001 means that uniquely our research and development is covered for quality assurance.

"We're very proud to have that because our heritage is that we are a research and development based company," said Dr Bob Daniels, Research and Development Manager, who joined the meeting.

The safeguards are in place at Levington to ensure the highest possible standards and are a reassurance to even the most sceptical of clients.

"We make sure product is right before we start the line running. We used to have 'policemen' at the end of the line who would say 'yes' or 'no' but we have empowered the workforce so that anybody can stop the line if they see something wrong. Quality assurances are high and a great deal of training has been done to reach this level. We can trace back everything if anything goes wrong to find out exactly what happened and put in our corrective action procedure," explained Dr Daniels.

It can take between three to five years to develop a pesticide or a fungicide before it reaches the stage where it can be produced commercially so they are currently working on developments now which won't be available until the year 2000.

The excellent Research Station allows development and comparison work to go on in both outdoor and controlled environments and is a wonderful springboard for new products.

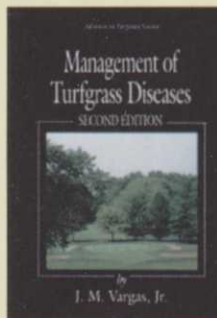
The company spends over £1 million a year on Research and Development. "It's a lot of money on tomorrow," says Dr Daniels.

Among developments recently launched is the water soluble sachet which Turfclear is now sold in.

"For safety purposes it's another step forward. The ultimate is not to have any contact at all and water soluble sachets help towards this. It's all part of the on-going product stewardship."

Words again spoken with a high degree of pride and enthusiasm and it is those qualities which will carry Levington Horticulture on to the next millennium.

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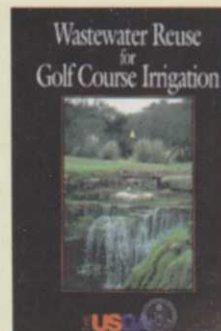
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