Burr's "Bush Factory"


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BURR'S "BUSH FACTORY" .... Connecticut Case History On Progressive Conservation

"Only God can make a tree..."

That classic line will be disputed by no one in authority at C. R. Burr & Co., Inc. For 70 years, the Manchester-based firm has been close to Connecticut Valley soil, a healthy company with healthy respect for the omnipotence of nature.

But there is nothing like 70 years in the nursery business — most of them successful years — to make also for a realistic awareness that the Lord helps those who help themselves. There is nothing irreverent in recognizing that production and inventory control cannot be left entirely to the Supreme Being.

The nurseryman must do certain things himself, at precisely the right time and in exactly the right way. That, if one stops to think, summarizes almost any manual of factory management. Whatever the product, differences lie more in techniques than in principles followed.

By doing the right thing at the right time in the right way, the Burr company now has what is probably one of the half-dozen largest nursery operations in the Northeast and, in fact, is outranked by relatively few in the entire country. An odd although not especially important side effect of this growth is that the firm

ABOVE, Charles S. Burr, president of the company and son of its founder, inspects some of the existing sites for which his organization is nationally known.

LEFT, quality on parade. Sturdy evergreen shrubs getting their start on a Burr plantation in Connecticut will rise from the ranks to grace some of America's finest homes and recreation areas.
... and Then

Circa 1910 but, even then, the Burr company could not be called a “one barn” bush factory. Old photo shows work force at warehouse and shipping room then located on Oakland Street, Manchester. Fourth from left in foreground, wearing derby hat, is the founder of the company, Clifford R. Burr.

may be less well known by its Manchester, Conn. neighbors now than it was in 1898.

The reason is simple, Burr marketing today and for some time past has been on a large scale, strictly wholesale basis, selling to garden supply centers and other nurseriesmen. Its storage, office, packing and shipping functions are correspondingly large, completely efficient but housed in buildings more functional than ornate. The off-street location, while not remote, gets scant notice from the passer-by.

It was not always that way.

When Clifford R. Burr founded the company in 1898, he specialized in growing fine fruit trees on his then-limited acreage in Manchester and sold them, one at a time, from door to door. It was a good way to start and an excellent way to get better acquainted with more of his neighbors. In the process, he built up a solid reputation for high quality stock and equally high standards of business conduct.

Growth, then, was inevitable: in acreage, product lines and market coverage. The Connecticut nursery gradually broadened wholesale distribution westward and southward to become well known as far away as Michigan and the Carolinas.

This has been called a conservative member of a conservative industry. To the extent that the phrase fits, company officials neither deny nor apologize for it.

To grow the actual product may be less modern than to fabricate a flashy imitation out of synthetic materials but certainly is no easier. If conservatism means conducting a business in 1968 with the same principles of integrity demanded by its founder in 1898, Burr is conservative. If it is reflected in the firm’s policy always to “grow up to quality” rather than “grow down to price,” the word still fits. If it is conservative to keep and improve upon the same basic lines in an era when some manufacturers boast of having so many new products never even heard of five years ago, then Burr is in that category.

And doing quite well in it! Clifford R. Burr may have been conservative in the constructive sense of that word but he stayed in tune with the times from the day he started until his death in 1946. The record suggests that, as with many typical Yankees, the traditional caution in his makeup was sprinkled liberally with a spirit of entrepreneurship. Some of his ventures paid off, some did not, but willingness to be venturesome always was there. Since his passing, the company has made notable strides in technology, marketing methods and sales volume under his son, Charles S. Burr, now president of the firm. But these result from carefully calculated moves which the founder, if still present, probably would not have resisted and, indeed, might have initiated. He was that kind of a man.

To stay in Connecticut when the center of the market has moved west and south is not conservatism but common sense. Getting back to that “only God can make a tree” concept, Connecticut Valley soil and climate conditions happen to be ideal for propagation of evergreens in particular and those are among the largest factors in Burr’s business volume today. Various shrubs and trees also thrive in this area.

The company is not sentimental about it. Roses, another major item in the Burr line, do well in Connecticut but do better, or at least get a better start, where the growing season is longer. These now are obtained primarily from contract growers in California.

There are plenty of other shrubs, hedges and trees to occupy the hundreds of acres in Burr’s several Connecticut plantations. As a matter of fact, the nursery business is the state’s...
fastest growing agricultural industry
and Burr, obviously, leads the pack.
That would hardly be possible without alert, forward-looking operating
time.

Relaxed but not detached might describe the atmosphere here. It shows
up in the cooperative, friendly atti-
tudes of the work force, from green-
thumbed veterans who have the
nursery business in their blood and
background, to young college-trained
horticulturists who have joined the
company in recent years.

A sense of humor helps, too, and
is clearly present in the Manchester
organization to which Mr. Burr him-
self has been known to apply the
whimsical title “bush factory.” As
with all genuine humor, this is lib-
eral laced with sober fact. Here is
agriculture but also it is manufacturing;
considerably more sophisticated
than many realize.

Humor and sophistication both
sparkle in an incident which had its
start toward the end of the 1960
presidential campaign. Burr had de-
veloped and patented a new hybrid
teas rose. (Incidentally, the fact that
such things can be and often are
patented is common knowledge in
this “conservative old industry” but
a surprise to many laymen.)

At any rate, no stranger to the
virtues of well-timed national pub-
licity and with no misgivings as to
the outcome of that political horse
race, Mr. Burr had the happy thought
calling his new rose Pat Nixon in
honor of the next President’s wife.
She, by the way, was equally con-
fident about the election and gracious
in permitting her name to be used on
the rose.

He can laugh about this now but,
at the time, Mr. Burr had to make
an agile recovery to salvage what he
could from that crack in his political
crystal ball. He didn’t do too badly
at that. The rose was quietly renamed
“First Lady” and he personally pre-
sented a bouquet to Mrs. Kennedy
who seems to have been equally
gracious about it all. A photo of the
presentation received wide circulation
and now has a prominent place in
his office.

Most Burr horticultural innovations
are not similarly amusing and per-
haps none so mortifying but all are
gratifying and, over the years, there
have been a good many of them.
“Firsts” are something of a tradition
with this company which constantly
researches and experiments with that
in mind. And potential customers
soon learn about them from a mar-
tening organization considerably ex-
panded in recent years.

The old days and the old ways
would have precluded the kind of
growth which has resulted. Problems
of drought, disease, insect pests al-
ways will exist but are less forbidding
today with the irrigation systems,
pesticides, fungicides and mechanical
equipment which never were avail-
able to the founder.

Gone, too, are the old bring-your-
own-basket-and-trust-to-luck distri-
bution methods. The Burr people have
pioneered in packaging nursery prod-
ucts, from the standpoint of adding
sales appeal and providing maximum
protection during storage, enroute
and on display.

As far back as the 1920’s, Burr
Nurseries pioneered in assisting sev-
neral national organizations to com-
mence marketing nursery stock.
Through this experience, the com-
pany has learned to handle the dis-
tribution of such products in large
volume and over great distances
which might very well pose problems
that would stump the average nurs-
ery.

To bring a shrub or tree from a
tiny cutting, through various inter-
mEDIATE steps, to the marketplace is
a complex process which, in some
cases, may take years to complete. It
requires special knowledge, long ex-
perience and that rare ability to know,
not only what to do and how but —
equally important — the best
time to do it. Steps involved need
to be detailed here for they would
be meaningful only to other profes-
sionals in that field but the present
industry status of C. R. Burr & Co.,
Inc. indicates how effectively it now
operates.

A bush may be a bush by any other
name but not necessarily the same
bush as was grown back in ’98. By
its own efforts and in close coopera-
tion with University of Connecticut
scientists, Burr does things different-
ly and puts a new face on that word
conservatism by which it often has
been labeled.

Through its president, the com-
pany is actively affiliated with lead-
ing trade associations in its field.
Early in January, Mr. Burr was
elected vice president of the Eastern
Regional Nurserymen’s Association.
His firm, for many years, has been a
member of the Manufacturers As-
sociation of Connecticut.

There is vitality in this company
as there so obviously is in its prod-
ucts and there is a progressive tongue
in its conservative cheek when it re-
fers to itself as a "bush factory."
That name will serve until one more
colorful comes along but, in the
meantime, it stands as a rather unique
but impressive testimonial to Con-
necticut’s industrial diversity and
leadership.