

### Cut Foliage Production

Cut foliage is vegetation used in large quantities as a source of decoration on its own or in association with flowers in bouquets. Evergreen plants with green, silver or variegated leaves are usually used and species with berries are now also becoming popular. A recent statistic from Holland indicated that 25-30% of bouquets now consist of foliage compared to 5%, 15 years ago. This trend is set to increase further because of the green, healthy image presented by such products and because of the predicted increase in consumption of floral products.



The South of Ireland has long been recognised as an ideal location for the production of foliage because of its mild moist climate. By selecting sheltered sites and suitable soils, the relative freedom from severe frosts and cold winds means growth starts earlier and continues late into the year giving rapid growth rates and high yields of healthy quality foliage.

In the relatively short time since foliage production commenced in the early 90's, the industry has expanded to be worth about €3 million to the South West where several million stems of both cultivated and wild foliage are exported annually. There is now over 150 hectares of cultivated foliage crops in the Munster/ Leinster region - the largest areas in Kerry & Wexford with smaller areas in Cork & Waterford. The main cultivated species grown is eucalyptus, closely followed by laurel, pittosporum and Ozothamnus species. Other species grown in smaller quantity are *Viburnum*, *Brachyglottis*, rosemary and heather. Important forest and woodland species include Rhododendron, Pine, Noble fir and Birch.

Teagasc & Bord Bia are carrying out trials on new species for the future.



### The Markets

Traditional users of foliage – florists continue to use large quantities but the most significant change in the market for foliage in recent years has been the rapid increase in supermarket sales. Important requirements in accessing this market are:

- i Regular supply of a fixed volume.
- ii Good consistent quality with fixed specification.
- iii Fixed price.

Satisfying the above criteria have been the objectives of the industry in Ireland to date and meeting the changing requirements of that market place will be the greatest challenge for the years ahead. A wide customer base has been built up over the past number of years both at home and abroad. Customers are constantly looking for something new in this industry so it is essential to have constant contact with buyers and regular market monitoring.

Researching new species is an important part of the development of the industry in Ireland and the unique Irish climate is able to offer new species of interest to customers.



### Requirements for production

For the producer, foliage plants must be: -

- i. Capable of rapid regeneration after cutting
- ii. Have low susceptibility to pests and diseases

Given a suitable local climate for the species to be grown, the site should be readily accessible and sheltered. For the majority of subjects the land must be well drained, yet sufficiently retentive of moisture and nutrients to maintain steady growth. Neutral or slightly acidic soils are preferable for most species grown for foliage.





*Rosemary cut foliage plantation in Co. Kerry*

Most plant material is raised from cuttings with planting taking place during the late spring or early summer period. Plant density varies from 2250 to 5000 plants per hectare depending on the species.

The site should be cleared of perennial weeds prior to planting and it is essential to follow a programme for annual weed control in the first 3 years of establishment. Annual pruning is essential for most species to help maintain health and vigour of the plantation.



### Harvesting and Marketing

All harvesting is done by hand using a secateurs. Stems should be carefully selected for quality of leaf and shoot balance. Teagasc provides training in the necessary skills required. Well furnished sprays from 45 to 60 cm long with stems pencil thickness are ideal. Stems are bunched in 10's and should be stood in water overnight where possible and kept cool prior to packing and transport.



*Teagasc training operators in the skills of harvesting cut foliage.*

### Costs and Returns

It is important to bear in mind that whilst some species reach economic cutting size after two growing seasons, most of the other subjects require three or up to four growing seasons in the field.

Levels of annual production varies according to subject, age and vigour of the plantation. Experience to date suggests that a well managed *Eucalyptus* plantation may produce 100,000 stems per hectare (40,000 stems/ac) and continues cropping for 12-15 years.

#### Costings (Eucalyptus)

€/ha

Crop establishment (plants, preparation planting)	€2964
Annual Return Yr 3/4 to Yr 15 (100,000 stems/ha)	€5928
Annual production costs (includes harvesting & transport)	€4446
<b>Net margin per hectare (from year 3/4 onwards)</b>	<b>€1976</b>

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