



Digging for victory? How garden centres do their bit for Britain

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Nothing better demonstrates the British passion for gardening than the news that tickets for the Chelsea Flower Show are being sold on the black market for six times their face value. This week, more than 150,000 people will make the pilgrimage in person to Chelsea. Millions more will watch live TV broadcasts or read about the gardens and displays in their newspapers or online.



It is hard to imagine any other countries where touts could hope to make a killing from a flower show or where enthusiasts would be warned against the dangers of buying forged tickets.

This week, more than 150,000 people will make the pilgrimage in person to Chelsea. Millions more will watch live TV broadcasts or read about the gardens and displays in their newspapers or online. Napoleon once famously dismissed the British as a nation of shopkeepers. Today, he would be far more accurate to describe us as a nation of gardeners.

It is no surprise that Chelsea is such a hot ticket. After all, around 27m Britons – nearly one in two of the entire population – are gardeners, making it the country's most popular pastime.

Gardening is not limited by age, geography or background. While there is no doubt that gardeners have, on average, an older profile, a mixture of TV programmes aimed at a younger audience, the desire for self-sufficiency and a successful drive at schools to encourage young gardeners is spreading the green gospel.



Terra Firma has for years supported the Prince's Trust and Burncoose Nursery in Cornwall which produce a unique garden for Chelsea showcasing the talent of young people. Whether it is growing vegetables on an allotment, designing a suburban garden or planting a window box, Britons have green fingers.

It is also good business which is why Terra Firma has recently got involved by acquiring the Garden Centre Group. The UK Garden products market is worth over £5.6bn, a figure which has grown over the past five years despite the tough economic climate. Nearly a third of this total is spent at the country's 1,000 garden centres with DIY stores and supermarkets accounting for a similar proportion of the market.

Garden centres, of course, can trace their roots back to the Chelsea and other flower shows. When gardeners had to rely on public transport, nurseries had to take their plants to the public and the shows were largely designed to help these sales. It was only when cars became much more common in the late 1950s and early 1960s, allowing gardeners to travel to the nurseries themselves, that the first garden centres were created.

Their architects, however, would not recognise the size, diversity or popularity of garden centres 50 years later. The Bridgemere Nursery in Cheshire, for example, covers 50 acres, making it one of the largest in the world. Like many garden centres, it has diversified its interests to host a wide range of shops, restaurants and play areas for children. But it is still its plants and gardens which remain the main attraction for the 1.5m visitors to Bridgemere every year. Over a million plants a year are grown on site and displayed in show gardens. Chelsea may only last a few days. The attractions at Bridgemere and many other garden centres around the country last all year.

The Garden Centre Group has some of the country's best-known brands including Blooms, Country Homes and Gardens as well as Bridgemere itself.

It fits very well into Terra Firma's long-established strategy of focusing on long-term investment in asset-rich businesses in essential industries. With 130 attractive sites, there is no lack of tangible property assets. In the Garden Centre Group, we also have an army of loyal customers which includes a gardening club with two million members.

We see it as a business which has enormous potential to grow. Just like the best gardeners, we are prepared to put in the effort and resources to see the business bloom. We also understand that what makes garden centres so popular with their customers is their individuality.

It might seem strange to view garden centres as an essential industry but the hundreds of thousands of people who will visit their local nursery today support that view.

With economists increasingly giving emphasis to happiness as a key measure of a country's success, our continued passion for gardening represents at least one green shoot for recovery. As an elderly gardener said to me half-jokingly: "young man if you want to be happy for a few days buy a book, if you want to be happy for a decade or so get married, but if you want to be happy for life grow a garden..."

Link: www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/comment/9280791/Digging-for-victory-How-garden-centres-do-their-bit-for-Britain.html