

# Dynamic Planting For Public and Garden Spaces

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Innovative nurseryman **Bert Griffioen** is a third-generation nurseryman whose family has been in the business of growing herbaceous perennials since 1923. The nursery in Wassenaar, near The Hague, produces 4 million plants a year in over 800 varieties. Griffioen's main business in mainland Europe is with Garden Centres.



Griffioen has been involved in designing unique machinery which has revolutionised the trading capacity at the nursery and has also helped his customers to maximise their sales by developing a unique point-of-sale and merchandizing programme.



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# Q&A

What do you see as the three main challenges for the garden design business in the next year?

The main challenge is to keep the consumer's interest going in gardens and plants, and in enjoying their backyard and spending time around the house. Challenge number two is to attract new customer groups; consumers in their twenties and thirties, young parents, who have no 'green tradition'. Number three is durability. I think the consumer will not accept anything else in the near future.

How can we face these challenges positively?

A translation of the subject into gardening may be the use of long lasting (perennial) plants, no use of plants that need to be sprayed, butterflies, bees, etc, so that the garden becomes the ultimate feel-good place. And I think consumers are willing to spend, cocooning is the answer in uncertain times.

How different do the Netherlands approach public space planting than here in the UK?

To be honest, public space planting in the Netherlands has become very 'green' over the past decades: just green, pale green, dark green. Budgets were limited and are expected to be reduced further. There is hardly any colour to be seen in most of the cities, as perennials have disappeared, bedding plants have become in many cases too expensive and the main problem we face is: lack of knowledge. Unfortunately many designers have not been handling plants in practice, which means they have no feeling with, as we call it, the 'mechanics' of the plants: how fast do they grow once planted in a park, how long will they last, will they fall apart or not, diseases, hardiness, etc. Looking at many designs the lack of knowledge just faces you. And of course: some designers build beautiful plantings, which last only one season, then look ugly for the following years to come.



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Why do you think budgets have been a problem - you mention 'everything being green' and no colour - is this due to budget constraints?

I'm not aware of the way public space plantings are being financed in the UK, but here the local government reserves a certain amount of money for the 'green environment' and it is up to the managers, more or less, how to spend it regarding maintenance. Lawns are cheap, roses are expensive, perennials are extremely expensive to maintain (some still think...). As their budgets have become more and more limited over the past years, except for perhaps the past two or three, they have been very careful not to introduce plantings that might cause problems in maintenance. Now, crisis, budgets for municipalities will become smaller, as they have to spend more money to assure social security, extra police, etc. Their funding, government money and income by local taxes, are shrinking. It is a challenge to show how it is possible, by using perennials, to keep the quality up and the cost down.

How are you tackling these issues of lack of knowledge and poor planting schemes?

We have combined consultancy, production, design, planting and knowledge; which is not common in our country and perhaps not at all in the UK. We have been able to change the attitude regarding perennials (in particular) by selling a solution to a problem rather than just selling plants. We have been able to prove that it's possible to have a display of perennials at the cost of maintenance of cheap shrubs. We have shown that this is possible if you follow correct preparation of the soil (70% of your success!), use of quality plants, correct number per square metre and fertilize correctly. We have developed a simple pricing structure per square metre and in most cases the local managers just ask us to solve the problem: make it bloom.



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How did you start as a nurseryman?

I'm third generation in the company. My grandfather started in 1923, my father in 1949 and I joined in 1974. We had one of the first garden centres in the Netherlands, starting in 1958, which still exists, although we are not involved anymore. In the garden centre I have learned to 'think in concepts', complete solutions.

What is your speciality?

My profession is perennial grower, but I must admit I hardly touch plants anymore. I think my personal speciality is to inspire people to become fond of perennials.

What is it about your business that makes you energised and excited?

Each and every day is different. Everything can be done better. Start something, believe in it and feel you are on the right track.

What do you think makes a good public planting scheme?

The customer's wishes translated into a scheme with the lowest possible maintenance. Of course a good scheme must provide a long flowering period, perennials and bulbs combined should last for 9 or 10 months a year.

What plants excite you?

One plant that always strikes me is *Persicaria amplexicaulis*.

What will you be talking about at Palmstead's event?

I will show what we have achieved in the Netherlands, what cost looks like and, above all, how fast good results can be achieved.

Do you think it's important to share information from country to country on how we do things differently?

Yes, I think this is very helpful for our industry. I know for sure, for example, our simple concept, combining the nurseryman's and local manager's experiences, is successful in saving cost.

I think regarding the UK, saving cost by using perennials though would need a different attitude towards perennials. Using perennials our way means a designer needs to think of a design that's made with low maintenance in mind. The user, the citizen, will only notice 'colour' and, perhaps, be aware it looks different from three months ago. Whether the Salvia he just passed on his way along the roundabout is East Friesland, Rügen, nemorosa or May Night will not bother him at all. I will show why we use in our designs May Night and nothing else.

How do you suggest we tackle the issue of low budgets but staying creative in our landscape?

By using more perennials. Full stop.

**Bert Griffioen** will be speaking at Palmstead Nurseries' 2010 Soft Landscaping Workshop on 22 September at the Ashford International Hotel.

Registration is now underway for the workshop at [www.palmstead.co.uk](http://www.palmstead.co.uk)



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