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Nursery Management in Horticultural Crops

*Mukesh Kumar
Young Professional-II (YP-II) Division of vegetable science, ICAR-Indian Agriculture Research Institute, New Delhi, Under the PPV&FRA Funded Project DUS Centre for Radish & Carrot
*Corresponding Author's email: mukeshkumar301299@gmail.com

The horticulture sector, which includes fruits, vegetables, flowers, plantation crops, spices, and medicinal plants, plays a crucial role in global food and nutritional security, as well as in generating employment and income for farmers. The success of horticultural crop production largely depends on the quality of planting material. A well-planned nursery serves as the backbone of horticulture, providing healthy, disease-free, true-to-type, and vigorous seedlings and planting materials. Nursery management in horticulture is therefore a systematic approach to producing and supplying high-quality propagules, ensuring better crop establishment and higher productivity.

Concept of a Nursery

A nursery is a place where seedlings, cuttings, layers, grafts, and other planting materials are raised under favorable conditions before transplanted into the main field. It functions as the initial stage in the life cycle of a plant where optimal care, protection, and management are provided. Modern nurseries also serve as hubs of research, training, and demonstration for progressive farmers and entrepreneurs.

Objectives of Nursery Management

Production of quality planting material – to ensure healthy growth, uniformity, and disease resistance.
Early crop establishment – raising seedlings in protected conditions reduces risk from adverse weather.
Conservation of elite germplasm – nurseries help maintain pure, true-to-type varieties.
Commercial supply – nurseries provide planting material for large-scale horticulture enterprises.
Employment generation – nursery enterprises create jobs for rural youth, women, and entrepreneurs.
Research and training – modern nurseries act as centers for demonstrating new technologies.

Advantages of raising seedlings in nursery

It is very convenient to look after the tender seedlings
It is easy to protect the seedlings from pests and diseases
Economy of land usage (duration in the main field is reduced)
Valuable and very small seeds can be raised effectively without any wastage, Uniform crop stand in the main field can be maintained by selecting healthy, uniform and vigorous seedlings in the nursery itself.

Types of Nurseries

Nurseries in horticulture can be broadly categorized into the following types:

1. Temporary Nursery:
These are seasonal nurseries established for a short duration to meet specific crop requirements, such as vegetable seedlings for a season.
2. Permanent Nursery
A permanent nursery is a well-established, year-round facility equipped with infrastructure like shade houses, greenhouses, irrigation systems, and mother blocks for continuous production.
3. Commercial Nursery
These nurseries are operated for business, producing large quantities of seedlings, grafts, or ornamental plants for sale.
4. Institutional Nursery
Managed by agricultural universities, research stations, and government farms, these nurseries focus on producing quality planting material for distribution and conducting experiments.
5. Hi-tech Nursery
Hi-tech or modern nurseries use advanced technologies such as polyhouses, mist chambers, tissue culture labs, hydroponics, and automated irrigation systems for mass propagation of elite planting material.

Site Selection for Nursery

The success of a nursery begins with selecting the right site. Important considerations include:
Soil: Well-drained, fertile, sandy loam soil with good organic matter is ideal.
Water: Assured supply of clean, quality water throughout the year.
Topography: Slightly elevated land to avoid waterlogging.
Accessibility: Easy approach to markets, transport, and farmers.
Climate: Favorable for the crops intended to be propagated.
Protection: Fencing to safeguard from animals and unauthorized entry.

Nursery Infrastructure

A well-managed nursery requires proper infrastructure for effective functioning:
Mother plants/block – to supply scion wood, rootstocks, and cuttings.
Propagation structures – polyhouses, shade nets, mist chambers, and greenhouses for controlled propagation.
Irrigation facilities – drip irrigation, foggers, and sprinklers for efficient water use.
Tools and implements – budding knives, secateurs, sprayers, and pots.
Storage units – for fertilizers, growth regulators, and pesticides.
Composting units – to produce organic manure.

Propagation Methods in Nurseries

Horticultural nurseries employ both **sexual** and **asexual propagation methods**:
Sexual Propagation (using seeds):
Common in vegetables and certain fruit crops like papaya, custard apple, and guava.
Seeds should be disease-free, viable, and treated with fungicides or bio-agents before sowing.
Asexual Propagation (vegetative):
Cutting – used in grapes, roses, and bougainvillea.
Layering – practiced in litchi, jasmine, and pomegranate.
Grafting and budding – used in mango, citrus, and rose.
Micropropagation (Tissue culture) – for banana, orchids, and ornamental plants.

Nursery Management Practices

1. Soil and Media Preparation
Soil should be sterilized (solarization, steaming, or chemical treatment) to eliminate pathogens, nematodes, and weeds. Potting media often includes a mixture of soil, sand, and organic manure or cocopeat for light texture and better aeration.

2. Seed Sowing and Germination
Seeds should be sown at appropriate depths, spacing, and moisture levels. Pre-treatments like soaking, scarification, or stratification improve seed germination.
3. Irrigation Management
Frequent but light irrigation ensures healthy seedling growth. Automated systems like drip or mist irrigation improve efficiency.
4. Nutrient Management
Balanced fertilization, use of bio-fertilizers, and organic amendments like vermicompost enhance seedling vigor.
5. Pest and Disease Management
Integrated Pest Management (IPM) is essential. Preventive measures include seed treatment, biological control agents, sticky traps, and minimal use of safe pesticides.
6. Hardening of Seedlings
Before transplanting, seedlings are gradually exposed to external conditions (sunlight, reduced watering) to improve survival in the main field.
7. Record Keeping
Systematic records of seed sources, treatments, sales, and customers are vital for efficient nursery operation.

Quality Standards in Nursery Management

Nurseries must ensure the following standards:
Use of **certified seeds and planting materials**.
Maintenance of **true-to-type mother plants**.
Regular inspection by horticultural officers.
Certification under national schemes like **National Horticulture Board (NHB)** or **seed certification agencies**.

Challenges in Nursery Management

Despite its importance, nursery management faces several challenges:
Limited availability of genuine and disease-free planting material.
High cost of modern nursery infrastructure.
Lack of skilled manpower and technical knowledge.
Pest and disease outbreaks.
Market fluctuations and competition.

Future Prospects of Nursery Management

The future of nursery management in horticulture looks promising due to:
Rising demand for fruits, vegetables, and flowers.
Increasing awareness about quality planting material.
Government support through schemes like **National Horticulture Mission (NHM)** and **RKVY**.
Technological innovations like **aeroponics, hydroponics, and tissue culture**.
Growing scope for **export of ornamental plants and nursery products**.

Conclusion

Nursery management in horticulture is not just a technical necessity but also an economic opportunity. A well-managed nursery ensures timely availability of high-quality planting material, directly influencing crop productivity and profitability. By adopting scientific techniques, modern infrastructure, and sustainable practices, nurseries can become key drivers of horticultural development and rural entrepreneurship. With increasing demand for diverse horticultural crops, investment in nursery management holds immense potential for the future of Indian agriculture and beyond

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