



Case Study: Tully Nurseries



Ownership type	Privately owned by Tully family.
Business size	Small.
Core activities	Horticulturists and suppliers of plants; landscaping.
Businesses	Tully Nurseries and Tully Landscapes.
Products	Seeds & bulbs; plants & trees; fruit & veg; gardening accessories.
Address	Richardstown, Ballyboughal.
Age	36 years old.
Generation	Second.
Employee no	50 (four family members actively involved).
Turnover range	€1-5M (group turnover).
Export Market	UK (approx. 100,000 plants are exported).
Main Brands	"Bella Bloom" and "Winning Plants".
Key Finding	Formalising the family business.

Company Background

Established in 1979 by Martin and Joan Tully, Tully Nurseries & Plant Centre is one of Ireland's premier suppliers of plants. The founder, Martin Tully was a student of the Botanic Gardens, Glasnevin, and worked for Fingal County Council, Dublin, prior to setting up as a landscape contractor in 1973. Finding it difficult to source plants and trees all year round, Martin noticed an opportunity to set up a plant nursery. He began growing plants on a half-acre site for cash-and-carry wholesale. The lack of Irish demand for plants led Martin to export to the UK. Their customer base grew to include Landscape Contractors, Landscape Architects, Garden Designers, DIY chains, Garden Centres, Supermarkets and private homeowners. The business has expanded, with today's site now 25 acres and producing over 1 million plants per annum. Tully Nurseries import and export plants to and from the continent and beyond. Recently, the company embarked on a new product development programme, which led to successful plant varieties including the award-winning Hebe Rhubarb & Custard. As the founding generation releases control, a highly qualified management team is in place to ensure sustained business growth.

Interview with Martin Tully

Co-owner and founder of Tully Nurseries

Family Involvement

Martin's son and daughter are second generation managers of Tully Nurseries Ltd: Padraig Tully as Managing Director and Niamh Tully as Marketing Manager. Tully Landscapes, the business that Martin founded now operates under his son Martin Jnr. and both businesses have become aligned: *"it's very successful and fits in with the nursery business"*. Founders Martin and Joan are gradually passing the core business to the next generation. Martin has lessened his involvement in day-to-day operations, but still remains a key stakeholder in the long term strategic planning of the company.



Founder, Martin Tully



Post-Recession Recovery

Like businesses nationwide, Tully Nurseries was left shaken by the economic downturn. From 2007 to today, the company turnover has halved, according to Martin. *"Building stopped so there weren't landscapers buying plants."* Furthermore, the company was hit with bad debts as some customers failed to meet payments. However, the market demand has picked up somewhat, and with that customer needs have changed. *"A different type of product is being bought now. People want to brighten up their homes with containers and flowers more so than plants"*, found Martin. New product development, considered a hobby to Martin, is central to the business. In order to meet customers' demands for novel, high quality and different plants, they've developed new plant varieties with sports and seedlings found in their nursery and garden centre. Some of their innovative plant varieties include Hebe Black Beauty and Hebe Raspberry Ripple. The company's Hebe Rhubarb and Custard won the Best New Plant out of 109 entries at the 2012 HTA National Plant Show in Coventry, England. It also won the best new plant for 2013 at Bord Bia Glas Irish trade show in Citywest, Dublin. Furthermore, the company continuously seeks ways to develop through new efficiencies and technologies. They are currently putting in place a new integrated system for customer payment which will greatly enhance business efficiency.

"We would like to be respected in the industry as offering high quality, being on the ball, efficient and honourable. It would mean an awful lot to us."

— Martin Tully



Niamh, Martin and Pdraig Tully present An Taoiseach Enda Kenny with Best New Plant for 2013, Hebe 'Rhubarb and Custard'.

Tully's Nurseries — Formalisation in Family Business

Martin Tully's role has transitioned from company leader to a mentor and advisor. *"We're pulling back, there's no doubt about it. Day-to-day management I wouldn't be as much involved now as I used to be. There are people in place in the various sections that look after that."* When the business started, there were two in management—Martin who led the landscaping side and his wife Joan who ran the finance and administration. Now a team of seven manage the company's finance, marketing, sales, and administration. Management meetings are held monthly and the board members, who are all family, attend bimonthly meetings. Martin possesses a wealth of horticulture and industry knowledge, while both Pdraig and Niamh have business and marketing qualifications. This mix gives the company a distinct competitive edge. *"It's a good mix because you need a good balance in any business."* While horticulture is a loved hobby of Martin's, his children see the industry more pragmatically. *"I let my heart rule my head more than they would. They would look at it from a business point of view which is more important."*

Niamh's marketing background made her an invaluable addition to the company. *"My daughter Niamh is a huge influence in the business. She worked for a number of companies after college. She would be the driving force for a lot of the sales."* Niamh suggested clever brand names, mainly famous horses and desserts, for their variety of Hebe plants. This branding technique meant customers were not alienated by botanical names and would seek further plants to add to their branded collection. Tully Nurseries' award winning plant, Rhubarb and Custard is a big seller in England (40,000 of these plants are currently exported to the UK) and licensed in Australia, New Zealand, among other countries.