

# Growing your Mail Order Business

A mail order  
packaging guide



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## Introduction

Your produce is precious. You have planted it, watered it, nurtured and harvested it. Now it is ready to be sent out into the world.

To grow your mail-order business, packaging is a vital and highly visible ingredient. Good packaging, one could argue, is as important as a good product.

Your packaging needs to be robust and look good on arrival. It has to be able to stand up to handling, movement, temperature and scrutiny. It needs to keep your produce as fresh and as perky as it was when you packed it.

Packaging is the first point of contact for your product and your brand. When a customer opens your package, you want them to be delighted; they are opening a perfect and well-chosen gift. You want to build trust through your packaging and produce. Your customers' loyalty to you, and their growing commitment to the ethos of your brand, will contribute to the success of your sustainable business.

### Good packaging makes good business sense.

#### Communication is key

- Your packaging is a moving billboard. Think about strong branding with clear messages.
- Include clear and helpful advice and instructions about your products: storage, planting, feeding and watering.
- Keep in touch with your customers at every available opportunity:
  - Before delivery: explain if a particular plant is not ready to send. Let your customer know when a parcel has been despatched.
  - During delivery: keep in touch if there are delays.
  - After arrival: invite customers to give you feedback, either directly and privately, or through social media: Twitter or Facebook.

#### Stay legal

Keep up to date with, and be aware of, the legal obligations when sending products outside of the UK.

#### Be thoughtful and green

Your customers will thank you for it. Reducing your carbon 'rootprint' and making good decisions about materials can be both time consuming and challenging. Yet growing a business that is conscious about the environment is an integral part of your story.

- Share environmental tips and advice with both your customers and other businesses.
- Encourage customers to reuse and recycle when possible, and include clear advice about how to do this.
- Be flexible about using new – and old – materials. For example, plastic might not be the archetypal villain in the piece.
- Invite your customers to share their concerns, thoughts and ideas with you. Being honest and learning from each other will develop long lasting relationships. You're in this together.

In a Which? Gardening survey, 36% of respondents had experienced problems when buying mail-order plants. 17% attributed their disappointment to damaged goods.



## Material world

How do you choose which material to use when presenting and wrapping your products?

To consider...

- Packaging is a small part of a product's environmental impact, yet it is the first thing your customer sees when your produce arrives. This creates a powerful association with your brand.
- Consumers are increasingly influenced by which materials are used in mail-order purchases and are also suspicious of any excessive layering and padding involved. The 'Russian doll' effect of placing a box inside a box is unlikely to nurture respect or loyalty.
- As a small business, how can you source materials that are cost-effective? Do you know other like-minded, local companies with whom you could share bulk buying?

### The three Rs

A good starting point is to reduce, reuse and recycle, and in this order. Lighter and fewer materials that can be reused are preferable to recycling, which uses yet more energy.

### PAPER V PLASTIC

**Plastic:** We have got used to seeing images of plastic carrier bags tangled in trees and plastic debris washed up on beaches. Our perception? Plastic is evil and harmful to wildlife.

**Paper and cardboard:** Brown paper packages look positively green. As consumers, we love paper and card because it fits our picture of all things bright and eco friendly.

But...if used correctly and disposed of properly, could plastic actually be better for the environment than paper?

One established veg box supplier has spent considerable time and effort analysing its packaging. The result? By changing from cardboard to plastic boxes, they could reduce the carbon footprint of the company's packaging by 70%.

**Wool**  
Warm and cosy?  
Sheep's wool is now being used in some veg box schemes to keep produce cool.

**Cornstarch**  
Sounds good and usually described as home compostable. However, the jury is still out on starch-based plastics. It could be that they take more energy to produce than oil-based bags.

**The reasons:**

Paper uses more energy to produce than plastic.

Plastic creates less CO2 pollution than paper.






Cardboard boxes are more likely to disintegrate after several uses.

Plastic boxes can be used almost forever.

**Green ink?**  
When printing on bags and boxes, it's worth asking if your printer can use biodegradable ink. And of course, boxes must be free from staples or glue.

## 'Green' Packaging Symbols

There are many symbols you can use on your packaging to inform customers about its recyclability or green credentials. Here's a quick guide to the most common....

	Mobius Loop	Can be recycled, but only where the correct facilities exist. When shown with % inside, indicates percentage of recycled content.
	Plastic ID symbols	A number between 1 and 7 inside the triangle identifies the type of plastic used for the packaging.
	FSC	Lets your customers know you have used wood that comes from FSC certified forests or from post-consumer waste. 3 different types depending on content.
	NAPM	The NAPM mark is only given to paper or board with a minimum of 50%, 75% or 100% genuine paper and board waste fibre, no part of which should contain mill produced waste.
	Bio Seedling	Symbol denotes compostability. It is the registered trademark of European Bioplastics. Use on products certified to be industrially compostable according to the European standard EN 13432/14955.





## Branding tips

### A few easy ways to stand out and be remembered

Make sure your logo is crisp and sharp. If possible, get a large hi-res version. Avoid small low-res jpegs.

Use good quality images which make your product range look great. Take pictures of you or your staff picking products and packing orders and show how you 'care'.

If you don't already have one, a strapline or tag line is a good device to use together with your logo as your logo may not communicate what you do on its own. Keep the message as short and simple as possible but be descriptive e.g. 'delivering beautiful hand-picked flowers'

Identify what's special about your company, products or service and use it to promote yourself.

Consider using the services of a graphic designer who can smarten up your identity and give you the tools you'll need to move forward.

If you are using a designer, be sure to ask for a variety of file sizes, plus a single colour version of your logo. If possible, get a vector version of your logo. You might not be able to open it on your PC, but it will be infinitely scalable so printers can use it to produce banners and posters in the future.



**Continuity**  
Use your brand at every opportunity!

Use the same colour theme and font styles on everything you produce.

Keep your brand consistent across different media such as labeling, leaflets, care guides, advertising to promote familiarity of your brand.

## Sending produce and the law

As a commercial enterprise, in order to send anything which is intended to grow (plug plants, bulbs, bare roots etc.) within the UK or EU, you must first apply for a plant passport from the Plant Health and Seeds Inspectorate (PHSI). An inspector will come and visit your nursery to ensure quality of your product and growing conditions.

Within the UK and EU fruit and vegetables for eating, or

cut flowers, can be sent fairly unrestricted, but it is best to check with the PHSI for up to date information.

For sending produce outside of the EU, controls are much tighter and you will need to apply for phytosanitary certification or other documentation. This also means your produce will need to be inspected at border controls, which will mean further difficulty with packaging.



## Void fillers

Choosing an outer size which closely mirrors the product is the most cost effective and environmentally friendly method, but you will usually need a little extra padding for maximum protection.

Filler	Pros	Cons
Air Pillows	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Light</li> <li>• Easy to use</li> <li>• Available in various reprocessed or biodegradable forms</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High initial outlay for air fill machine</li> </ul>
Packing peanuts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lightweight</li> <li>• High level protection</li> <li>• Snugly cradles your products</li> <li>• Available as 100% biodegradable</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exposure to moisture will cause biodegradable corn starch versions to melt</li> <li>• Polystyrene versions hard to recycle</li> </ul>
Shredded paper	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attractive</li> <li>• Recycled and recyclable</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not resistant to moisture</li> <li>• Recent research suggests paper products often have a much higher carbon footprint than synthetic options</li> </ul>
Wood wool	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Natural and recyclable</li> <li>• Looks lovely</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Comparatively expensive</li> </ul>



# Packing light

## Smaller items – and non-perishable produce

### A few tips about sending by post

#### What to use

##### Envelopes

- Simple • Light
- Perfect for sending packets of seeds
- Could you add your logo using your own stamp and 'green' ink?

##### Mail bags

- Durable • Lightweight
- Waterproof
- Recycled versions available

##### Padded envelopes

- Widely available
- Only use if your products really need the padding
- Could you have a branded label to stick on the package?

##### Mail boxes

- Sturdy • Stylish
- Easy to recycle at home
- Can also be reused by your customers

- Try to buy from one of the many 'green' stationery companies. Most of the mainstream suppliers now also produce envelopes made from recycled materials.
- Depending on your budget, you can print your own envelopes or boxes, but remember to request biodegradable ink.
- Try to stay light. Your customers will respect you for using strong and sensible packaging but you need to choose wisely. It shouldn't be excessive or wasteful.
- Invite your customers to tell you what they thought about the way your goods were packed, and how they looked when they arrived. Social media is great for giving quick and easy feedback.
- Encourage your customers to reuse, recycle or compost at home, if and when possible. Include friendly and helpful suggestions about how to do this.
- Always remember to include clear instructions about planting.

#### PIP

PIP stands for Pricing in Proportion, the new Royal Mail pricing guidelines based on size and weight.

Is your package a small letter, large letter, small packet or medium parcel? You could invest in your own Pricing in Proportion ruler to save time - and money.

#### Extra reading

There is lots of useful information on the Royal Mail website, including stories about small mail order businesses which are thriving.



## DESIGN TIPS

Get a stamp or stencil of your logo made up. You can then apply it to everything you send out really cheaply.

If you print out address labels, set them up to include your logo.

Stickers can have a dual function particularly on smaller packages. You can use them to seal your packages or add decoration to an otherwise plain box. Branded

sealing tapes are a great way to promote yourself without the need to have your logo printed on the box itself.

Little 'freebies' popped inside your parcels can make a big difference. Consider branded growing labels if you supply seeds, free samples or something which will help them care for their goods, like a care guide.





# Growing on

## Bulbs and pots and things to be planted

This is a bit of a mixed bag - or box. Whether you're sending the tiniest of seedlings or the stockiest of pot plants, your little beauties will still need the utmost tender loving care.

Communication is key. Your customers will love you if you keep them up to date with what's happening. It could be that the plant they've ordered isn't ready to send, or may not be available at all. You might be approaching a Bank Holiday. Whatever it is, let people know.

Get to know your courier company. Explain how precious your produce is, and how it needs to be cared for on its journey. And let the company or driver know that everything arrived in tip top condition. It's surprising how few people give positive feedback.

### Plug plants and seedlings

- Can often be grown and sent in the same containers.
- Trays with individual compartments keep each seedling snug and safe, with extra space for the roots.
- Blister packs can also hold a small number of plants and will keep in moisture.
- If necessary, you could wrap each plug plant separately.
- Expanded polystyrene (EPS) trays are often designed with lids, perfect for mail order. EPS is a good material for insulation and shock absorption.
- Very compact, flat containers for tiny plug plants are also available, some designed to fit through a letterbox.
- EPS can be recycled but usually in specialist recycling centres and these can be scarce.
- Advise customers to break up EPS trays and use the material for drainage, as they would use broken pots. Blister packs may be recycled with household plastics, but check with your supplier.

### Pot plants

- Easy to send in a box but remember to use a light void filler that won't crush foliage.
- Find a courier company you can trust, preferably one which has experience of sending plants. A 'fragile' sticker alone is not enough.

### Bulbs and tubers

- These look robust but are still vulnerable in transit.
- Using void fillers will prevent them from bouncing around.
- Explain to your customers that deliveries coincide with planting times.
- Include information about storage and planting.

### Bare-rooted plants

- A low carbon 'rootprint' way of sending all kinds of plants, from ferns to fruit trees.
- Urge customers to unpack immediately, or as soon as possible, with advice about soaking and for how long.
- Include information about how long the plant can be stored before planting.
- If a plant is not ready to send, or perhaps travel is unwise due to extreme weather conditions, let your customer know.



## DESIGN TIPS

Remember to make sure that your logo is prominent. Tie-on labels work well with nets and bags, and adhesive labels for plastic bags. For an organic look try natural twine and jute sacks. You could stencil or stamp your logo onto material bags.

If you mail out large volumes of plug plants and seed trays then if not already branded consider having your own branded sleeves produced. This would be a great opportunity to promote yourself and include general care instructions for the customer.

Branded sealing tapes, stickers and labels add that finishing touch and build upon your brand values.





**CASE STUDY**

**Crûg Farm Plants**

Crûg Farm Plants is a specialist nursery in Caernarfon set up by Sue and Bleddyn Wynn-Jones in 1990.

[www.crug-farm.co.uk](http://www.crug-farm.co.uk)

Sue says:

Without the mail order business we wouldn't still be here. We're selling things that people can't get anywhere else. We are a niche; we never advertise. We're not en route to anywhere and we are very dependant on mail order. We started sending our plants out about eight years ago. It was a time when some businesses had stopped sending plants. We were always against mail order: we'd heard some horror stories.

Today, things have improved dramatically, mainly thanks to the Internet and the couriers themselves.

We use a company that is good at sending fragile and perishable goods. In this country, it's an overnight delivery. We ship throughout the EU, and that takes 48 hours. With some countries, such as Italy, it can take longer than 48 hours. In the main, everything arrives safely and we get very few complaints.

We are offering a personal service. If someone has ordered six plants, and perhaps one isn't ready to send, I'll call and offer an alternative.

We designed the boxes ourselves. They're good boxes! They're made in the UK and they arrive flat packed. They've got carrying handles, and the pitched roof boxes can't be stacked. They hold around 20 litres and the footprint is 54x42cm. In the taller box, there's a little stable door so it means that we're not dropping in the plants from a great height.

We sometimes tube things, if they're fragile. The plant itself is wrapped in cling film. When it's cool, we send lots of open ground plants. You might have a selection going out with something that's very thorny, so we wrap things separately. We line the bottom of the boxes too, with plastic.

A lot of people tell us that they keep our boxes. They use them as Wendy houses for their children.

**Fresh and direct?**

**Fruit and vegetables**

The rise and rise of the veg box is partly due to its perceived eco credentials. As a consumer, a weekly box of local, seasonal produce can do wonders for your conscience. And your health. No wonder then, that today, the strongest market growth for organic food is through box schemes.

As a veg box provider, the quality and variety of your produce is key. Yet the packaging itself is part and parcel of your customer's experience. The box can be just as important as bright, bold brassicas and ripe, plump pears. So what is your box saying about you? And when can a box be a bag?



*"A lot of people tell us that they keep our boxes."*

*"They use them as Wendy houses for their children."*

Product	Positives	Not so positive
Cardboard boxes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Perceived as eco-friendly.</li> <li>Easy to re-use, although dependant on customers returning their box each week.</li> <li>Easy to recycle at the end of its life.</li> <li>Scope to design your own branded box.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>On average, a cardboard box can only be used four times before it starts to fall apart. Some veg box providers tape them up. Not beautiful but it shows commitment.</li> </ul>
Plastic crates or boxes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Robust; easy to clean and re-use.</li> <li>Can be produced using recycled plastic.</li> <li>Long life span.</li> <li>Easy to apply logo and messages about plastic being a good sustainable solution.</li> <li>Current thinking = smaller carbon footprint than cardboard.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Perceived to be less eco-friendly than cardboard. This could be clarified through design and communication on the boxes.</li> </ul>
Hessian or jute bags	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Your customers can use them in between deliveries or collections.</li> <li>Great for brand awareness if used out and about.</li> <li>Long life.</li> <li>Good eco-credentials.</li> <li>You might want to consider selling additional bags as shoppers.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Can be relatively expensive.</li> </ul>
Wooden boxes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Good looking.</li> <li>Recyclable and reusable.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Expensive.</li> </ul>





CASE STUDY

## Rhos Market Garden

Mick and Alice Westrip set up Rhos Market Garden 15 years ago. They deliver jute veg bags of organic fruit and vegetables to collection points in their local Powys community every week.

[www.rhosorganic.co.uk](http://www.rhosorganic.co.uk)

Mick says:

When we first started, we used recycled veg boxes and mushroom crates to deliver our produce. We changed to jute bags because we thought it looked more grown up.

80% of our customers live within a 4-mile radius of us. Although we've just started going over to Clun, and that's about six miles away. We deliver to collection points. When we drop each week's veg off, the idea is that people leave last week's bag for us to pick up.

We like the jute bags. They last forever; they're virtually indestructible. We've still got some that we've been using for five

years. With a cardboard box, you might only be able to use it three or four times.

Many of our customers end up using them as their shopping bags. We don't mind. They've got our logo on them so people see our name.

Having a logo has been really good for us. It gives a unity when we send things out. It's a worthwhile thing to do.

Jute bags are quite an investment. Our bags cost about £2.50 each. But they work well for a business of our size. And now, we're also selling them as shoppers.



*“Having a logo has been really good for us. It gives a unity when we send things out.*

*It's a worthwhile thing to do.”*

## DESIGN TIPS

Colours and branding are particularly important where fruit and veg are concerned. Earth tones are obviously best for conveying your commitment to carefully nurtured, healthy produce.

Remember to **keep your brand consistent**; avoid changing the colours and fonts from item to item.

Add the recyclable logo to your packaging if it's non-returnable.

**Stencils and stamps can be used on all sorts of packaging, literature and containers. You can even brand your own potato sacks or shoppers with them.**

Why not include a small leaflet in the box with tips on storing the produce and other products available. Remember to include your logo on any receipts and invoices.

If you are using wooden crates or plastic boxes, and your logo is bold and clear, a stencil and some spray paint is a cheap way to personalise them.

For an authentic market style look try using chalkboard vinyl and liquid chalk pens. Make up A5 size boards using a thin wooden backing and **write a personal message to the customer**, tuck this in the box with the produce.

Think about how you present yourself to your customer, first impressions last and even with the best looking boxes you need to look the part too. **Branded shirts are a good start**, a short waist apron would be a great addition and of course don't forget your vehicle.

If your budget allows, why not have your van 'wrapped' completely in vinyl? You'll stand out a mile and have a huge travelling billboard! If you don't have your own van, magnetic decals that your courier could attach to the van whilst delivering your produce is a cost effective alternative.





# Petal Power

## Cut flowers

Bunches and bouquets of seasonal flowers are lovely to receive, but here are some things to consider:

- Find a courier you trust and aim to develop a long-term relationship with the company. Give feedback about how much your customer appreciated their gift when it arrived in prime condition. Could you give them a gift of flowers to show your appreciation?
- Stay in touch with your customers, before and after delivery. Explain how your flowers are being sent and include food and clear instructions about how to look after them on arrival.
- Invite feedback from customers. If you use social media, encourage people to tell you and others how delighted they are with your flowers and personal service. Suggest they share photos of the flowers to post on Facebook or Twitter.
- Probably the most popular way to send a hand-tied bouquet is in a cellophane bubble filled with water, packed 'standing' in a box. Try to source biodegradable cellophane and encourage customers to add it to their compost.
- Cut flowers can be sent flat in a box. Tie the stems with garden string or raffia and encourage customers to reuse it. If you use water retaining gel or wadding, this is also home compostable, so do let people know.
- Consider designing your own boxes with your own branding. You could also include positive messages about how to recycle, or even reuse the box.



## DESIGN TIPS

### First impressions count!

Receiving flowers can be an exciting experience, branding the outer box accordingly adds to the thrill. Personalise your boxes to suit the occasion. Pink sparkly packing tape is lovely for a birthday bunch of flowers but would obviously be unsuitable for a funeral wreath.

Adding decorative items such as bows and ribbons to the boxes can disguise their plain appearance.

Remember to include your brand on anything you send out; you can order stickers cheaply online which can be used to hold tissue in place or brand a box.

Business cards are cheap to print, and come in a huge range of finishes and papers. Why not get some made up with care instructions, or as discount vouchers.

## CASE STUDY

### The Flower Hive

Based in Pencoed, Eva Krasenska started The Flower Hive three years ago. She grows seasonal, traditional, cottage garden flowers according to organic and biodynamic principles.

[www.theflowerhive.co.uk](http://www.theflowerhive.co.uk)

Eva says:

I do a lot of wedding flowers. But I also send out gift bouquets. I use the aqua bubbles to send out my hand-tied flowers. That's a standard thing for florists. It's basically cellophane, and you pour in the water. I put the aqua bouquet in a box. The boxes are fairly ordinary.

I tried to source biodegradable cellophane. It's tricky to find it. You can get it; you see greetings cards wrapped in it. But I need big sheets of it. I did find some but when I put it on the compost heap it didn't biodegrade! Perhaps it takes a long time. It was also milky and it didn't look very nice.

I also use brown paper and tissue paper in lots of different colours for my gift flowers. I tend to deliver them myself so I can make sure that the boxes stay upright. They're not branded, but I do attach my card to them.



Suggest customers share photos of your flowers to post on Facebook or Twitter.



# Checklist

Have you....

- Filled gaps with void fillers?
- Made sure the package is well sealed?
- Clearly labelled the package with correct name and full address?
- Popped some planting / care instructions inside?
- Not over packaged?
- Added a return address?



[www.horticulturewales.co.uk](http://www.horticulturewales.co.uk)

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