

Nurseries Setting Standards

Nursery builds reputation for quality

By Michael Danelon: CNP Specialist, Nursery Industry Development Officer NGINA

Howlong Nursery is located in the town of Howlong in New South Wales, on the northern bank of the Murray River and the north side of the Riverina Highway around 20 minutes north west of the Albury-Wodonga border. Starting from scratch in 1979 by Geert & Penny Mensinga, the nursery has evolved over time to become a specialist grower and supplier of quality plants for the lifestyle horticulture sector.

In the beginning, all growing techniques were completed by hand, and the nursery sales were conducted business-to-business and door-to-door from the back of an International metro van.

The current management of the nursery is via Geert's son, Nick Mensinga, who has been in the roles of General Manager and Director since 2006. Geert remains as a Director whilst second generation nurseryman Nick has gained experienced both in Australia and through sabbatical in the United States in large production nurseries.

Nick is well supported by his production, administration, dispatch and transport managers and the nursery staff who demonstrate their willingness to produce and supply quality plants.

The nursery is typically exposed to very hot dry summers and cold winters with good sunlight. At certain times of the year, the climate presents challenges

to crop production, however with the range of nursery infrastructure and growing systems, coupled with diligent management of these facilities, a desired environment for growing quality plants is achieved.

It was the adoption of best management practices in the nursery which were formally recognised under the NIASA accreditation to the Nursery Production Farm Management System Program in 2001.

Over the years the company has diversified growing a number of different product lines with different production systems for different markets and customers. Throughout the evolution of the nursery, seedlings have remained one of the core products. To help position the Howlong Nursery business for the future, value added branding under 'where it all begins' (as supported by the NIASA logo) was developed to reflect this not just to the customers but to the consumer.



Sarah Benevute selecting plants for customer orders from within the 10.5cm potted colour greenhouse. Plants are often packed ahead of the customer's orders.

The quality produced and offered by Howlong Nursery is achieved through business planning and review of the production planning systems. The sowing and plugging line has evolved over time to include modern equipment and software. Controlled germination facilities optimise seed germination and uniformity, with the plugs then moved through various climate modification facilities to ensure optimal growth and finishing is achieved.

Optimising this area of logistics of the sowing is set for revisions to cope with the expansion in markets and peak seasonal demand of spring and efficiency gains as the business continues to grow in capacity.

To reduce manual handling, extensive use of trolleys, trailers and plant conveyors placed over concrete pathways and raised benches allow an efficient flow of plants and lower risks of longer term worker injury and fatigue.



Seedling finishing stage within the retractable shade greenhouse.



10.5cm automated potted colour production on ebb and flow benches.

Howlong Nursery and its team of growers have gained an excellent reputation for producing quality plants. The nursery is always immaculately clean and tidy, setting the standard upon entry to the nursery right down to the flow from propagation, production and dispatch.

Machinery and automation continues to be introduced to increase nursery efficiency, with some of it quite revolutionary for the Australian nursery industry. The use of new technology and automation of retractable roof greenhouses, internal screening, boom irrigation, fertigation and business software drives plant consistency and productivity.

Howlong Nursery continues to invest in the future as a leader in the Australian Horticultural Industry and not just in the

nursery facilities but in its people and education of the customers.

A continuation of quality products, great service and a focus on generating an expanding interest in gardening within the wider community supports a broader market for the nursery industry.

At Howlong Nursery they believe in the quality ethic, "Do it once, do it right, to build a better company." Quality is defined as the skill and commitment you show when you perform your job to a high level of excellence. It's the pride you have in an error-free performance and they believe their customers expect this quality service every time. Howlong Nursery considers that responsible environmental management is an essential part of achieving business objectives whilst reducing the impact to

the environment. They are in the process of applying best practice environmental management under the FMS EcoHort® program.

Customer service is a focus and Howlong Nursery aims to continuously improve their products and processes to meet and exceed customer's needs and expectations. Howlong Nursery prides itself in their ability to respond to specific customer requests in the shortest possible time frame, thereby building excellent customer relations.

For those not operating under the FMS program talk to your local Nursery and Garden Industry Association Industry Development Officer about having an initial audit done or at least read over the FMS guidelines yourself as accreditation may be achievable.

Nursery maintains reputation for high quality

A reputation for supplying strong, healthy, vibrant plants is the recipe for success in a nursery enterprise and it has underpinned the Mt Nathan Nursery and Propagation family business on the Coomera River in Queensland.

The operation comprises two nurseries set over 5-6 hectares, two thirds of which is outdoor and the remainder under the Solarweave hot house fabric.

With a wide range of native and exotic plant stocks, it predominantly supplies the landscape trade on the Gold Coast, Brisbane, in northern New South Wales and up to the Sunshine Coast. It also sells to local councils as far north as Rockhampton.

The range of stock includes Grevillea, *Magnolia grandiflora* Little Gem, Teddy Bear and Kay Parris, *Hymenocallis* spp, Gardenia, Liriopes, *Murraya paniculata* and *Murraya* Min-a-min^{PBR}, as well as a large range of natives. It also produces tissue cultured plants such as Cordyline Red Sensation, Philodendron Xanadu, Lomandra Tilga and *Alpinia Zerumbet* variegated, and propagates its own plants including crotons and cordylines.

The tissue cultures are sourced from Western Australia and are grown in 42mm tubes for about three months. All tube stock is potted into a mix

consisting of 1.75 parts potting mix and 1 part perlite. The potting mix comprises 85 per cent composted pine bark and 15pc river sand. The tubes are also fertilised in the pots with the controlled release product, Multicote 12.

Mt Nathan Nursery and Propagation's Bruce Williams said they applied about 7 grams of the fertiliser for a 140mm pot and double this amount for 200mm pots.

"Everything is hand potted and we disperse the fertiliser so it's throughout the soil, rather than just being in one seam," Bruce said.

He said the nursery was the first one on the Gold Coast to start using the Multicote controlled release fertiliser about 15 years ago. "We use the Multicote 12 and we might go to the six to eight month release product over the winter period for our faster growing lines."

Manufactured by Haifa and distributed by Barmac, the Multicote fertiliser products incorporate a unique polymer coating that allows a slow, continuous release of dissolved nutrients to the root zone at a soil media temperature of 21°C. As soil warms up, the release rate increases consistent with plants' growth rate and nutrient consumption. Other factors such as microbial activity and soil



Bruce Williams shows the good plant root development using the potting mix and Multicote 12 controlled release fertiliser.

moisture do not affect the release rate. The fertiliser contains 20:5:12 NPK plus micronutrients.

"We have never had a problem with the Multicote – everything is so bloody green with it," Bruce said.

"People always comment on how good our plants look. They are so strong and green – and this has always been the case with Multicote. "Our customers are happy."

Plants are also topdressed with products such as Super Iron if required. Topdressing can particularly occur either side of winter.

They are watered with high quality water from the Coomera River using either overhead or spray stake irrigation.