



A message from our Chair

Welcome to the July edition of Growing Undercover.

Most of the PCA team attended the Hydroponic Farmers Federation (HFF) conference in Melbourne recently. It was an excellent 3 days of learning, networking, and catching up with growers, allied trade and other corporate partners.

Congratulations to John Elford, President of HFF and the Organising Committee for an informative and well-run conference. One of the highlights for me was listening to the High-Tech Grower Panel moderated by Chris Millis from Flavorite Group.

Thank you to the panel of Chris & Will Millis (Flavorite Group), Peter Van Den Goor (Katunga Fresh), Nicky Mann (Family Fresh Farms), Steve Marafioti (Sundrop Farms) and Naresh Singh (Perfection Fresh Australia) for sharing their learnings in the areas of labour, energy, growing systems, reducing costs of production and sustainability initiatives. And to Phil Ritchie from Rijk Zwaan for suggesting the panel to be held at the conference.

It was fascinating to hear how the panel members managed the labour crisis through the pandemic, how their businesses are adapting to meet changing consumer needs and how costs of production and growing systems are managed and adapted to increase productivity.

Some key take away learnings for me from the panel include:

- Providing productivity incentives, accommodation, testing and training for staff throughout the pandemic was, and continues to be important
- Crops with a high labour requirement were reduced given the labour shortages and production ramped up when the labour numbers improved
- Automation, robotics and data driven growing systems are here – the ongoing challenge is integrating the data with human knowledge to maximise productivity per square meter
- Contingency planning to manage risk is critical



Matthew Plunkett • PCA Chair

and more important than ever before

- Using solar power and renewable energy sources, co-generation, screens, and growing crops with lower temps at night and raising temperatures in the day were some options discussed to mitigate the effects of rising gas and electricity prices
- Use of biodegradable packaging, alternate growing media that can be reused, harvesting and recycling wastewater, generating alternative energy sources, and feeding energy back into the grid are some of the sustainability initiatives that were shared with delegates.

Perhaps, the most profound message came from Chris Millis when describing how the protected cropping industry has a great story to tell around growing more with less and the opportunity to better engage and communicate the industries sustainability credentials to the consumer.

Here in NSW, growers in the Sydney Basin are yet again dealing with floods, wet weather and low light levels leading to reduced yields. Energy prices and the cost of heating is preventing some smaller growers from planting crops this winter in addition to the sky rocketing fertiliser and fuel costs. This is compounded by the fact that some growers are not receiving fair prices for their products that takes into account the increased costs of production.

The recent Varroa Mite outbreak in Newcastle and surrounding areas is another reminder that further investment in biosecurity at our borders is needed. Varroa Mite is a destructive pest of honeybees and is a major threat to protected crops reliant on honeybee pollination.

In closing, our team have partnered with RMCG,

Chair report cont.

Applied Horticultural Research together with Family Fresh Farms to run an Integrated Pest & Disease Management Workshop at Family Fresh Farms on the 17 August (details included in this newsletter). Soon thereafter, a similar workshop with a Regional Tour is tentatively planned for the 8th of September in Virginia SA so keep an eye out for further details soon.

Until next time, have a great month.



Members of the high-tech grower panel discussing rising energy costs at the recent HFF Conference.

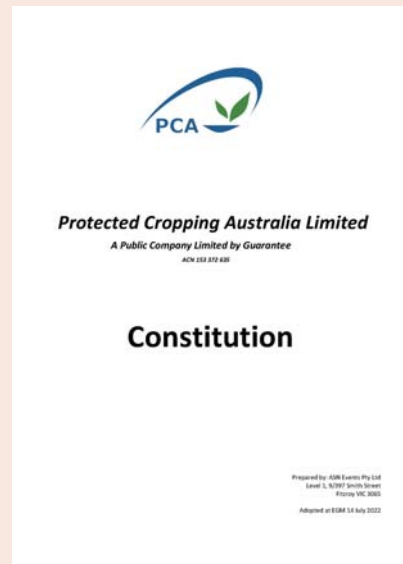
PCA Extraordinary General Meeting

At the Extraordinary General Meeting (EGM) held at the HFF 2022 Conference on 14 July 2022, members unanimously voted to adopt the revised Constitution.

A copy of the PCA Constitution adopted at the EGM is available on the [PCA website](https://www.protectedcropping.net.au) for your reference.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to email the PCA Company Secretary business@protectedcropping.net.au

EGM Minutes



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IPM in practice: A new approach to release beneficials

By Biological Services

The slow-release of predatory mites using sachet technology is being trialled in Australia to improve commercial integrated pest management (IPM) practices.

Biological Services, a commercial insectary and beneficial insect provider based in South Australia, Western Australia and Queensland, is trialling the sachet packaging with the predator mite *Cucumeris*. This beneficial is effective in controlling thrips in crops such as cucumber, capsicum and eggplant.

Biological Services Director James Altmann said the sachets provide an even placement and continuous emergence of predators for about four weeks.

“The standard approach for releasing most predatory mites into crops has been with loose material shaken over the plants,” James said.

“This approach will continue to be used for many situations but applying loose materials is often difficult to calibrate, and we know that the more even the distribution over the crop, the better the results.

“The formulation inside the sachet provides a continuous release of predators, reducing the need for multiple applications of loose material. A hook is attached to each sachet and growers simply hang them every few meters on a leaf-stem, string or wire. The mites walk out onto the crop from a small hole at the top of each package.”

Monitored field trials are currently underway with commercial growers with the aim to expand the range of predators available in sachets in early 2023, including *Californicus* for spidermites and *Montdorensis* for whitefly/thrips.



Figure 1: The trial of *Cucumeris* sachet technology in capsicum.

Sustainable transport for beneficials

Biological Services has also introduced sustainable packaging for the thrips predator *Orius*, commonly used in capsicum crops.

The original plastic packaging has been replaced with a biodegradable label and cardboard cup with a removable lid. The packaging allows better breathability and includes a gel formulation which provides an extra source of water and nutrition for the 2,000 adult predatory bugs during transport so they can establish more quickly in a crop.

“This means the *Orius* are more active when they arrive and we have noticed an increase in predator activity and initial establishment. This is good news for growers, particularly those in high thrip and virus areas,” James said.

The packaging can be left in the crop and removed with plants at the end of the crop cycle.



Figure 2: New sustainable packaging for beneficial insects.

Hydroponic Farmers Federation (HFF) Conference 2022



Tony Bundock • PCA Deputy Chair

For those of us who attended the HFF Conference last week there was plenty to see both at the trade stands and also at the seminars with a quality speaker line up.

However one of the highlights of the event was the Conference dinner. This was held at Bunjil Place in Narre Warren which is a large cultural and arts centre for the City of Casey.

Hosting the evening for the night as MC was the ABC TV personality Brian Nankervis, who is a regular on our TV screens with the Rockwiz show. Brian is an excellent MC and provided the right balance of humour and entertainment throughout the whole evening.

The dinner was kindly sponsored by A and D Weighing, and Julian Horsey gave a brief but entertaining presentation that gave Mr Nankervis a run for his money!

However, there was a more formal side to the event, and two of the longest serving HFF committee members were presented with Life membership of the HFF.

Tony Spurling and David Pearson were the well deserving recipients of the awards which were presented by President John Elford.

The event concluded at around 9:30pm which was

followed by the 'after party' back at the Atura hosted by Enza Zaden's Herman van der Gulik. And as they say "What happens at the after party stays at the after party" so if you want to find out more, put the HFF 2024 Conference in your diary!

Finally a huge vote of thanks needs to go the HFF and the conference organising committee for yet another first class event.

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Classifieds

Greenhouse pipe rails

Condition: New (Incorrect ctc ordered)

Pipe rail support open with clamp – 1500 pce @ \$9 each

Pipe: 44mm

CTC: 600mm

Height: 15cm

Baseplate: 700 x 115 x 1.5mm

Pipe rail support open with clamp – 500 pce @ \$8 each

Pipe: 51mm

CTC: 600mm

Height: 10cm

Baseplate: 700 x 115 x 1.5mm

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Is This The End Of Outdoor Agriculture?

By Terry Memory

Commercial agriculture needs to be achieved at a massive scale to feed a growing world population. Every year approximately five billion acres of land around the globe are cultivated and planted or used to raise livestock. While the amount of land used to support commercial agriculture shrinks through overuse, degradation, pollution, and chemical contamination every year, these impacts pale to Big Ag's more significant issue. Climate change is fast becoming the number one concern facing the future of large-scale agriculture. With no means of halting its devastating effects, are we seeing the beginning of the end of outdoor agriculture?

A recent study by Stanford University stated, "Climate-fuelled temperature increases generated an estimated \$27 billion in insurance payments to farmers between 1991 and 2017. Those losses accounted for nearly 20% of the program's total payouts over that period." These insurance payouts, in many cases, were related to crop failures, but the increasing severity of drought and floods can have a far greater impact on agriculture.

Is This The End Of Outdoor Agriculture? cont.



Arable farmland is often located along the edge of river systems where natural flooding over millennia has added precious minerals and nutrients to the soil in these areas. While they present as prime areas for growing crops and raising livestock, they are also the first to be affected by floods. The size and severity of floods are increasing around the globe, and these larger flood events not only destroy farms and infrastructure but also remove much of this vital soil. While flood events are incredibly damaging to arable farmland, their impact is relatively short-lived compared to the devastation presented by drought.

A new article by Oxford Research states, "Droughts may be the biggest threat to food security and rural livelihoods globally". The growing severity of drought events experienced worldwide has rewritten the record books in many agricultural-based countries and economies. Australia recently experienced its most severe drought on record that affected much of the country. This drought event impacted crop and livestock production and saw many farming families leave their farms and move to city areas for employment. Whole towns and regions were negatively affected, and many simply ceased to exist.



How do these realities impact the future of outdoor agriculture?

It would seem difficult to imagine a scenario where outdoor agriculture can continue to provide the world's food supply and increase production outputs, given the issues mentioned and the myriad of other problems it now faces. One possible solution could be the greater adoption of Protected and Controlled Environment agriculture (PCE). These systems require the building of structures that protect and control the environments of the crops and livestock produced within them. Building a

structure that could house several thousand acres is not a plausible reality. Still, these structures can be created at scale and are far more productive than typical outdoor farmland on an acre vs acre basis.

Already many countries are adopting PCE, with countries like Denmark and Spain leading the way. In Almeria, Spain, the region presents an intensive example of PCE with over seventy-six thousand acres of land covered by PCE type structures that produce over thirty-one million tonnes of fruit and vegetables each year. In fact, food production in Almeria is believed to be thirty times greater than the equivalent area of farmland in the UK. While falling a long way short of being considered sustainable due to their unchecked use of plastics as structure coverings and the exploitation of low paid labour, they point to the possibility of PCE as a solution to global future food security.

The real benefits of PCE structures are that they can be positioned on cheap non-arable land and well away from flood-affected areas. They also have the advantage of harvesting and storing the available rainfall for future use. They are also protected by drought as that water storage can be used later and targeted specifically to individual plants within entire crops, radically increasing water efficiency. In many cases, that water can be recycled and have essential organic nutrients and amendments added to it. These PCE structures also reduce potential wind damage and make pest management more manageable.



The opportunity to have a PCE structure that covered a one-acre area but with an outdoor production output of thirty acres would be an incredible advantage to both developed and developing communities. Practices like organic and regenerative farming are far more achievable with a PCE structure because you have a far smaller area to maintain and manage. Perhaps the most exciting aspect of PCE agriculture is the ability for all of us to have a small structure in our own backyards capable of producing an abundance of nutritious organic fruits and vegetables. Outdoor agriculture already faces many complex issues that will dramatically affect its functioning now and in the future. Perhaps we will see people not only moving food production indoors but also much closer to home.

Year round asparagus production

By Mike Nichols

Asparagus is normally grown in the field in rows 1.50m apart with the plants 30 cm apart in the rows. In temperate climates it is the first of the spring vegetables to be harvested in the field and can be regarded as the harbinger of spring. The plants take 2-3 years to reach full productivity, and average yield throughout the world tend to be in the range of 5-10 t/ha.

In tropical countries (except for Peru) it is difficult to grow, because there is no dormant period, but in the 1950's a system (called the mother fern system) was developed in Taiwan in which once the plant was well established with 2-3 spears were allowed to grow into fern, and then future spears harvested as they emerged when 20 cm tall. When these fern shoots aged they were replaced by new spears being allowed to grow into fern. This system has major disadvantages including the need to support the fern, the problem of spraying the fern with pesticides which can fall on the emerging spears to be marketed, and even the difficulty of harvesting under a canopy of fern. (see photograph).

In Peru the unique climate of the west side of the Andes, with little rain, and a warm/temperate climate year round due to the cold current from Antarctica (Humboldt Current) means that asparagus grows year round, but by ceasing irrigation (drought dormancy) a short artificial dormancy can be produced. The fern cut back to ground level, and irrigation resumed, with the new spears being harvested for market. Using this system 3 harvest periods are possible every 2 years.

The availability of fresh asparagus year round in Australia is limited because once harvested asparagus has one of the highest respiration rates of any vegetable, and therefore has a very short shelf life. Air freight is likely to become increasingly expensive while sea freight though possible, is really suited only for very large consignments.

In most temperate countries (eg Australia) it is normal to stop harvesting about the middle of the summer (ie mid-December) in order for adequate amounts of carbohydrate to be returned to the storage root system to produce the next seasons crop.

Some 20 years ago I undertook a small experiment in a greenhouse of growing asparagus hydroponically in coir (cocoa peat). The results were

quite impressive, but only small volumes of coir were available to me at that time.

More recently I asked greenhouse strawberry grower (Allan Bissett) to grow some, using coir which had been once used for strawberries, and he agreed.

He constructed raised beds of coir, 1 m high and 1 m wide, and planted asparagus plants in them at a spacing of 30 cm apart, with 3 (and sometimes 4 rows to the bed). Daily watering with a full hydroponic solution ensured excellent growth, and in the autumn the irrigation ceased, and the fern dried out, and cut back to ground level. Early in July irrigation was started again, and by the end of July the first of the new spears appeared. Some 6-8 weeks earlier than in the field. Harvesting was easy, (because the beds were 1 m high), and the spears turgid, so snapped off by hand easily. The yield per plant was 1kg, compared with the normal field yield of 300g/plant, and the price per kg was 3 X the normal in season price for asparagus. He established 2 1 m wide beds in a 7 m wide Haygrove tunnel house. The yield was 22 t/ha of greenhouse space (which included paths), well over double normal field yields and early so the price was 3 x the price of normal season asparagus. In the right climate 3 crops would be possible in 2 years.

Asparagus is difficult to grow in Australia north of Brisbane because the summer rains and the high humidity predisposes the outdoor grown plants to fern diseases, but a greenhouse (as a rain cover), would provide excellent protection.

It would appear to be a perfect crop for tropical Australia marketing out of season to the southern states, or even into the affluent SE Asian markets. The blueberry project on the Atherton Tablelands demonstrates the value of plastic tunnels and hydroponics in such an environment.

In the southern States the advantage of earliness and local would be an attraction.

Yield Potential

Allan Bissett obtains yields of approx 1 kg/plant/year, with 2 1 m wide beds in a 7 m wide Haygrove. It should be possible to have 3 x 1.60 wide beds (with 5 rows of asparagus per bed) in the same size house. This is equivalent to 66t/ha –about 10 x the normal field yield.



Greenhouse asparagus –fern growth stage



Greenhouse asparagus – harvest stage

Farm walk: IPM in protected cropping, Peats Ridge, NSW

Date: Wednesday 17th August 2022

Time: 10 AM – 12:30 PM AEST

Location: Family Fresh Farms, Peats Ridge, NSW. More details to be provided to registrants.

Contact: Stephanie Tabone 0434 514 846, stephanie.tabone@ahr.com.au

Registrations: Limited spots are available, registrations are essential. Register for the event [here](#).

Overview:

Family Fresh Farms grower Wade Mann will guide participants on a walk in the glasshouse, showcasing how their IPM practices in their Qukes® (baby cucumbers) encompass a whole system approach of plant health, climate control, hygiene, biosecurity etc. Participants will then observe various hands-on demonstrations to learn of the key tools, principles and activities that can be utilised to ensure IPM practices are effective in various protected cropping environments. A light barbeque lunch will be provided.

The event presents an opportunity for participants to connect with IPM experts and for growers and agronomists to learn how to incorporate IPM into regular protected cropping farming operations and ways to improve IPM practice.

Biosecurity is of utmost importance to the Soil Wealth ICP project and to Family Fresh Farms. We ask attendees to adhere to the site's biosecurity measures and to arrive in a clean car, clean clothes, and clean shoes.

[Download Flyer](#)



The PCA Board would like to extend our warmest welcome and good wishes to our new member.

Individual Member

Ian Mungall, Red Jewel Nursery

Paul Gauthier, The University of Queensland

We look forward to many successful years together!

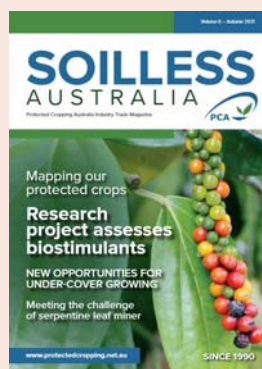
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Aiming for a win-win scenario for farmers and the environment
CCC Forum & Farm Walk explores nutrition management and how to reduce expensive fertiliser waste while preventing potential pollution

Meg Strang - NSW DPI Clean Coastal Catchments

The Clean Coastal Catchments (CCC) Project's latest Research Update Forum and Farm Walk attracted plenty of interest from local farmers, agronomists, and fertiliser suppliers in the Coffs Harbour region.



A Groscale installed amongst Aman Lehl's vines enables monitoring of plant water consumption without removing the pot from the row.

The forum held at Woolgoolga, north of Coffs Harbour, was followed by a tour through the vines at Corindi Beach with OzGroup Co-op berry grower and CCC research partner, Aman Lehl. Nutrient recycling and best practice management were key topics, with a focus on protected cropping, particularly in the berry industry.

Researchers and scientists explained their latest findings on fertiliser and irrigation management during the morning research update sessions. A bus load of growers, agronomists and other industry stakeholders then made the trip to Aman Lehl's Corindi berry operation for the afternoon farm walk.

Aman has hosted CCC farm research trials on irrigation recycling and reducing fertiliser waste since 2019. Farm walk participants saw Aman's state of the art fertigation system in operation as he shared his extensive production knowledge and his observations on evolving water recycling technology.



Aman Lehl (in yellow high vis) shared his extensive production knowledge at the CCC Farm Walk at Corindi.

Irrigation recycling can result in significant water and fertiliser cost saving for farmers. There are also substantial benefits for the environment if waste water nutrients are captured before they can escape into coastal water ways.

However getting this complex system to operate as required has not been easy. Melinda Simpson and Dr Sophie Parks from the CCC team joined Aman during the farm walk to discuss the many hurdles they have tackled in their efforts to capture nutrient rich irrigation run off water, and safely recycle it back on to Aman's berry crops.

Strolling through the berry tunnels and inspecting the machinery that controls the irrigation system, there was an engaging discussion with the crowd about profitability, sustainability, and adaptation to a changing climate.

According to Aman, the benefits of recycling fertiliser are two-fold, "One, it's great for the environment and two, we are reducing our water and fertiliser input cost."

"It's good to be able to talk about what's working and what's not with other grower," said Aman. "Some of them have ideas, so it is great to be able to share our knowledge and come up with solutions together."



Growers and agronomists discuss nutrient recycling during the CCC Farm Walk.

Matt Plunkett, Chair of Protected Cropping Australia and Senior Land Services Officer (Horticulture) with NSW Local Land Services, also took part in the CCC research update and farm walk.

"It was a terrific day, with great discussion on the challenges around sustainability within the industry and being adaptable in a changing climate," said Matt.

CCC research at Aman Lehl's farm is ongoing, in conjunction with berry nutrition trials at Department

Aiming for a win-win scenario for farmers and the environment cont.

of Primary Industries (DPI) sites at Ourimbah and Wollongbar. The CCC team will continue to roll out new research findings in coming years to support growers in implementing best practice fertiliser and irrigation management.



Dr Sophie Parks explains her findings on fertigation recirculation and the impact of seasonal conditions on nutrient uptake during the CCC Research Update Forum at Woolgoolga.

The CCC project is delivered by NSW DPI and is funded through the NSW Government's [Marine Estate Management Strategy \(www.marine.nsw.gov.au\)](https://www.marine.nsw.gov.au/) to keep sediment and nutrients on farm and out of coastal waterways, while supporting profitable and sustainable agriculture.

Find out more on the [CCC website](https://ccc.gov.au/)





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Can protected cropping save Australia's salad and fruit bowls from harsh weather?

ABC Rural / By Lucy Cooper



Lockyer Valley farmers Tommy Vo and Michael Nguyen say protected cropping structures reduced the impact of flooding. (ABC Rural: Lucy Cooper)

When lettuce prices jumped to \$10 off the back of extreme weather in New South Wales and Queensland it sent a shockwave through the nation, but some farmers in the flood zone were left relatively unscathed – because they grow under cover.

Now experts say protected cropping could be the key to keeping cabbage out of burgers and in spring rolls where it belongs and getting farmers back to planting after extreme weather.

What is protected cropping?

Protected cropping is the production of horticultural crops under or within structures.

It's more than just greenhouses according to Paul Gauthier, who is a professor of protected cropping with the Queensland Alliance for Agriculture and Food Innovation.

He says there are three different types of protective cropping.

"It can be a high tunnel that protects the crop from the weather, it can be inside a greenhouse, or it can be in a structure where it is fully indoors and the plants never see the sunshine," he said.



Professor Paul Gauthier says protected cropping will be an inevitable outcome for many Australian farmers. (Supplied: University of Queensland)

Protected cropping allows farmers to control the

environment of the plants they grow, including the temperature, water and soil in some systems that use hydroponics.

Professor Gauthier says it can protect plants from the negative effects of weather.

"By putting everything indoors and controlling your inputs you can start predicting what the outcome is going to be and your plants are protected," he said.

"In the case of a storm event, as long as your building can resist the storm, then all of your plants will be safe and you can continue to produce food."



Protected cropping structures can come in many different forms such as glasshouses, shipping containers, and plastic film-based structures. (ABC Rural: Lucy Cooper)

Skyrocketing demand

The system has been popular in Europe for years but it seems demand is taking off in Australia too.

Protected Cropping Australia is the industry body that represents farmers using hydroponics or greenhouses.

Executive officer Sam Turner says it is one of the fastest-growing production systems in the world.

"Internationally we see growth rates up to 10 per cent and in Australia we're seeing adoption rates around that 5 per cent mark," he said.

"There has been significant growth in the industry over the last five to 10 years and that seems to be accelerating in Australia."

Mr Turner says along with weather protection, the boom is being driven by the efficiencies that protected cropping provides.

"Some systems use up to 90 per cent less water for the same yields [and] yields are far higher because the plants are situated in a much more conducive environment," he said.

Can protected cropping save Australia's salad and fruit bowls from harsh weather? cont.

"It is easier for labour because there is a much more consistent crop, crop quality is a lot higher and it is a lot easier to manage pest and disease issues."



Sam Turner of Protected Cropping Australia says the number of farms using a form of protection over crops is growing rapidly. (Supplied: Sam Turner)

Can protected cropping mitigate flood events?

Tommy Vo and Michael Nguyen are growers of vegetables like eggplants and cucumbers in the Lockyer Valley in Queensland.

When two floods in 11 weeks tore through the area a few months ago, Mr Nguyen said he did suffer some crop losses, but nothing compared to neighbouring traditional farmers.

"Growing undercover means we have been able to mitigate the loss better because we are well protected," he said.

"With the recent floods this year we have kept out of the rain and protect ourselves pretty good given the circumstances."



Farmers in the Lockyer Valley have faced two major floods this year. (Supplied: Lockyer Valley Regional Council)

Mr Vo said growing undercover meant not only was his crop protected from the rain but the farm also recovered from the flood faster.

"I had the flood that come through, the heavy rain come through and within a week I got a new crop in straightaway," he said.

"I just cleaned out, put new weed mats in, new coco peat in, all within a week."

"Even if you have crop loss, your turnaround time is a lot quicker than an open field grower."

Controlling the weather, instead of relying on it

Professor Gauthier says with more extreme and variable weather events hurting traditional farms, protected cropping will inevitably become more common.

"It will allow us to predict in the future what we can grow," he said.

"If the weather is getting too warm, some plants won't be able to grow in some areas of the world so we will need to be able to start controlling the environment rather than being dependent on it."



Crops grown under protection can be produced without influence from environmental factors. (Supplied: Sam Turner)

In the past, good growing conditions and available land meant Australian farmers did not need to invest in crop protection. Mr Turner says that is likely to change.

"With the recent floods around the country, we're seeing a lot of growers who traditionally wouldn't be looking at protective cropping moving into some type of protected system just as an insurance policy against some of the wild weather that we're seeing," he said.

Mr Nguyen and Mr Vo hope to inspire more growers in the Lockyer Valley to get on board with protected cropping.

"Sharing knowledge is power and the more we can share the more we can build a thriving industry," Mr Nguyen said.

"With Australia's growing demands and population increasing, I think the future will be brighter if we put the word out there."

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Knowledge grows



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