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A U S T R A L I A

Protected Cropping Australia Industry Trade Magazine



Celebrating 30 years of your association

Introducing hydroponics
Q&A with Rick Donnan

THINKING BIG IN THE LOCKYER VALLEY

Protected cropping expands
in northern Australia

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SINCE 1990

Marking 30 years of PCA

Protected Cropping Australia is celebrating 30 years since its formation. To mark the milestone, PCA director, Jonathan Eccles, spoke to two founding members, Tony Biggs and Rick Donnan, about the early days of PCA and why the organisation was created.

Looking back to the early 1980s, hydroponic production was very much in its infancy in Australia. So too was greenhouse production, which was mainly confined to nursery and some cut-flower growing.

The general thinking was why would Australia need greenhouse fruit and vegetable production when we have such diverse climates and there's always warm weather somewhere in the country? Back then greenhouses were associated with northern European production with its long cold winters.

In the early 1980s Rick Donnan was working with Colonial Sugar Refining Company (CSR), an Australian company known for its rockwool insulation products. The Netherlands-based company, Grodan, had developed a horticultural rockwool that was being promoted as an ideal substrate for hydroponic production. Grodan had global sales rights except in Australia and New Zealand. So it was with these two countries that CSR saw an opportunity to develop a rockwool market for the emerging hydroponic industry.



Rick Donnan (left) with Tony Biggs today; 30 years ago they were instrumental in establishing the Australian Hydroponic Association and staging the first national conference for the hydroponics industry.

Hydroponics expands

At this time the Australian market for horticultural rockwool was confined to nursery propagation and carnations (as a scoria substrate replacement) as well as glasshouse tomatoes in New Zealand (as a pumice and sawdust replacement).

Rick, working at CSR, was tasked with developing the horticultural rockwool market so he approached Tony Biggs, who was then senior lecturer at the then University of Western Sydney, Hawkesbury (now Western Sydney University), for assistance. Tony had an extensive knowledge of horticulture including hydroponic and greenhouse production. Together they travelled the world looking at developing potential uses and markets for horticultural rockwool.

Rick and Tony both believed that if CSR's horticultural rockwool, now called Growool®, was to be successful then the growers using the product had to be successful growers also. It was from this concept the idea of having training programs in hydroponics began.

Around the same time, enterprising growers including Keith Suttonfield in the Northern Rivers of New South Wales, started growing lettuce in NFT (nutrient film technique) systems. Other growers soon followed as new lettuce varieties such as loose leaf and butterhead started to become popular with consumers.

These growers formed the Northern Rivers Hydroponic Association facilitated by Greg Seymour, who was the local district horticultural adviser with the then NSW Department of Agriculture.



The high consumer demand for soft-hearted and butterhead lettuce in the 1980s helped the nascent hydroponics industry develop a strong market in Australia. Photo Adobe Stock.



Egypt had a large stand to woo the Asian market with citrus.

Fruit Logistica strong in Hong Kong

Now in its 12th year, Asia Fruit Logistica was held in Hong Kong in September at AsiaWorld-Expo in Lantau against a background of protests against Chinese rule.

Fruit Logistica was held September 4-6 in Hong Kong early in the wave of protests that in recent months have escalated. In early September protesters had taken to the streets and barricaded the airport disrupting flights. Antony Allen, CEO of The Avolution in

Queensland, was one of the 12,000 visitors to this year's Fruit Logistica who attended despite news coverage of escalating protests.

"At the time they didn't really seem a big deal but there were lots of students about," says Antony, who regularly saw protesters having breakfast or lining up for coffee at local cafes near where Fruit Logistica was being held.

"Hong Kong still functioned normally but it did affect attendances with figures down perhaps around 20 per cent on past years but it was still a very busy trade show."

He noted that he observed that it was mainly visitors from the United States who stayed home and that some stands were static unmanned displays. Despite the protests there was a large contingent from China both with stands and as delegates visiting the trade show.

The Australian contingent was also strong says Antony with local growers on the Taste Australia stand. Around 70 businesses were

Apples were the biggest product group at Fruit Logistica and came from around the world.



Photos courtesy Fruit Logistica.

Growing your own seedlings

A booming business growing lettuce and broccoli to supply Australia's supermarkets revolves around a vast Cravo house at Lake Clarendon near Gatton in the Lockyer Valley in southern Queensland. Jennifer Stackhouse visited the farm to find out more.

The Lockyer Valley is a large, fertile growing region just an hour west of Brisbane. Set amid the network of fields and roads that spread

out from the highway is a vast glasshouse that sees the start of many of the lettuces consumed in Australian salads.

Koala Farms produces lettuce in the field in the Lockyer Valley and further west on the Darling Downs. The farm grows twin pack Baby and Gem Cos lettuce as well as 'Iceberg' along with broccoli, rocket and spinach.

Owner Anthony Staatz, who is a fifth generation farmer, runs the business with his wife Diane and their five children. In 2017 Anthony and Diane were named 'Grower of the Year' at Hort Connections.



Nursery Crew Leader Rohan Bonnell manages seedling production.

Since starting the business in the 1990s Anthony has invested in technology. His latest major investment was in the construction of a vast 6000 square metre Cravo house with a retractable roof at the Lockyer Valley site. It was completed in 2014.

All the seedlings that are needed for the farm are grown under its retractable roof. Before the house was built, seedlings were bought from a local seedling nursery.

Just six people work in the nursery side of the business to produce 400,000 to 500,000 seedlings per week, which equates to around 25 million plants a year, a figure that includes a staggering 10 million Icebergs. Overall, some 80 staff work across the two sites and farm 600 hectares.

Seedling production takes around four weeks in summer and six weeks in winter and each plant can be tracked. The same trays used for raising the seed are taken out to the field for transplanting. When the seedlings are needed for planting, they are racked up into field pods and taken directly to the surrounding fields or trucked to fields in the Darling Downs. →



The shade screen helps keep an even growing temperature for the seedlings.