

SOILLESS AUSTRALIA

Protected Cropping Australia Industry Trade Magazine



Mapping our
protected crops

Research project assesses biostimulants

NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR
UNDER-COVER GROWING

Meeting the challenge
of serpentine leaf miner

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SINCE 1990

There are exciting issues canvassed in this Autumn issue of your industry magazine along with new research findings on the topic of biostimulants (see page 22 for more on that topic).

In our feature story on mapping, Craig Shephard looks at how an interactive crop map has been beneficial to tree crop growers and why the opportunity to extend that map to cover Australia's protected cropping growers should be embraced. Read the full story on page 14 to discover how it works.

Importantly says PCA Chair, Nicky Mann, extending the mapping project to protected cropping will ensure that this industry has up-to-date data for our sector.

Handy statistics about horticulture have just been released by Hort Innovations in the form of a massive book titled *Australian Horticulture Statistics Handbook 2019/20*. The *Handbook* is available online as separate sections to make the information easier to access. The separate sections are fruit, vegetables, nuts and other horticulture (which includes nursery crops) along with a section on trade analysis. It is available on the Hort Innovations website (www.horticulture.com.au). For a snapshot of what's on offer and how the material was sourced, see our coverage of the online launch on page 8.

New crops

While Craig Shephard is keen to map protected crops across Australia he may soon have to include some new ones in his coverage. Research is happening across the world on the viability of high-value crops growing under cover.

Already growers in The Netherlands are producing vanilla and black pepper (the spice not capsicum) following research work on these crops under cover Wageningen University. Also under trial are dragonfruit (also known as pitaya), which has a growing market both in Australia and in Asia, and saffron, the world's most expensive spice and surely one of the most fiddly to harvest.

Mike Nichols, who presented a webinar on new crops to PCA members recently from his home in New Zealand, says we don't need to just look at exotic crops. Many traditional outdoor crops such as cherries, can be highly rewarding to grow under protected cropping. The development of dwarf rootstock and early and late varieties



Cherries growing under cover in the UK.
Photo Nicky Mann

is increasing the value of traditional crops and making them more viable to grow. With Mike's help, we investigate some of these new crops for protected cropping in this issue (see the story that starts on page 18). PCA members can also view Mike's webinar (and others from 2020) on the PCA website (protectedcropping.net.au).

Finally, with opportunities for graduates in horticulture booming, we hear from a recent graduate who is working in electronics (see Polani Shadur's piece on page 36).

Happy reading!

Jennifer Stackhouse, Editor

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Chair's REPORT

BY NICKY MANN

Welcome to our first edition of *Soilless Australia* magazine for 2021. As we head into autumn of this brand new year, the Directors and team at PCA trust you enjoyed summer and managed to spend precious time with family and close friends. We also hope you managed to squeeze in a couple of days off as you worked to keep fresh produce in our stores over the festive and holiday period.

Yes, we are all feeling a little shaken and apprehensive after last year but we must look forward and continue to focus on our goals and plans with positivity and determination. There will always be factors out of our control that hinder and slow the path forwards. What matters is how we approach the roadblocks or go around them.

My latest favourite quote is: "Being positive in a negative situation is not naïve. It's leadership." Many of you are leaders because you are farm and business owners, or managing teams of varying sizes, or are parents. The world needs strong leaders and people in our community who are strong and positive to anchor and assure people around you that everything is going to be okay.

It is human nature to depend on hope and I know we, as farmers and associated trades, live and deal on and in hope. We are always in hope of something. We hope for a good season, for rain, for DA approval, for good weather, for good prices, for good yields, for good orders and sales, for no pest and disease pressure, for loan renewals, for expansion, that family will come back into the business one day and there's much more you may be hoping for as well.

Getting back home

My hope this year is to get our amazing seasonal workers home to their families in Vanuatu. Some of them have been here since August 2, 2019 when they only signed up for a nine-month visa to work in Australia. COVID has had a dramatic effect on their lives and the lives of their families back home.

Over the past year, we have tried to make sure they are well supported mentally and physically and we've tried to turn this unfortunate change of circumstances into a positive. It has been an opportunity of a lifetime for some of our teams – paying off land, houses, taxis, fishing boats and school fees – which will change and enhance their lives forever in the future. Some of our team are now qualified forklift drivers and fully accredited First Aiders – so this again is a positive.

My hope is that our local team (Australians) continue to develop into leaders in our industry and continue to be empathetic, passionate, determined and resilient farmers, quality officers, packhouse managers, glasshouse administrators, packers, harvesters, growers and IPM specialists. My hope is they continue to keep up their dedication to the production of quality food, fibre, medicine and of plants, seedlings and flowers for our incredible nation.

Be strong leaders for your teams, family and your community because, in uncertain times everyone needs re-assurance that everything is going to be okay. We still have so much to be grateful for. We are the luckiest country in the world our with our COVID numbers in control because of strong and sometimes tough leadership to protect the greater good. Be the strong leader for the greater good and make 2021 the year of hope.

Nicky Mann, PCA Chair

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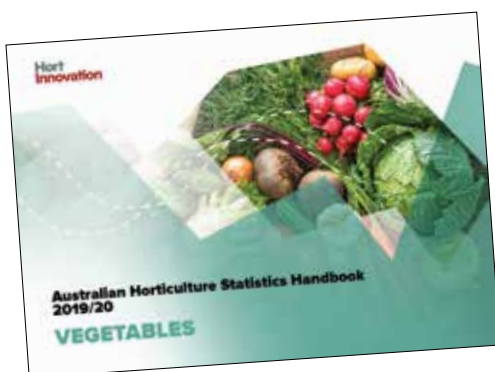
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New horticulture statistics handbook launched online

The sixth issue of Hort Innovation's *Australian Horticulture Statistics Handbook 2019/20* was launched via Zoom. Jennifer Stackhouse tuned in to find out more.



The latest industry statistics publication is available to download free online in five separate sections including Vegetables, Fruit and Trade analysis.

Adam Briggs, Head of Data and Insights at Hort Innovation, hosted the online launch with comments from Brendan O'Keeffe, also from the Data and Insight team, and Martin Kneebone, Managing Director of Freshlogic.

Adam explained that the book plugs a gap in the provision of reliable statistics for the horticulture sector and noted that the diversity of the sector presents a challenge for gathering and reporting statistics. Meeting this challenge has led to the development of unique methods to compile data.

"The short life of perishable products and the many touch points and suppliers has shaped the methodology used to compile the *Handbook*," added Martin, who said that there were 70 categories and a chain model that tracked the crops from production through import and export and the wholesale market.

The *Handbook* team has also included data from food services as well as retailers so that food chain models reconcile through to household consumption explained Martin.

"Food services includes many small players but is steadily increasing as a sector," explained Martin

The focus in the new *Handbook* is fresh produce. Categories such as tinned tomatoes and processed potatoes are excluded from the statistic overview, said Martin.

An important aspect of the new *Handbook* is the dashboard interface for online viewers. The dashboard allows better access to what is a 400-500-page pdf-format book that could be cumbersome to view and search online and also aids in plotting of historic data.

Trends and data

Brendan O'Keeffe outlined some of the trends and data revealed in the new publication. He said that in 2019/20 the value of Australia's horticulture sector rose to \$15 billion, which he said is equal today to the global sales of the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine. The review period included significant bushfire and drought, which affected both production and supply lines. Although production volume was down for many crops, values remained on par or higher in 2020 than in 2019.

In the review period, the fruit and vegetable sector saw a modest three per cent increase in growth. Raspberries and blueberries are the fastest growing horticultural categories. The strongest growth across all sectors was in the nut industry with a 19 per cent increase.

More information

The *Handbook* is available to download as a pdf in five sections: Fruit, Vegetables, Nuts, Other horticulture (which includes nursery) and Trade analysis.

For more information on the new publication, to download relevant sections or enquire about a hard copy of the book, see the grower links on the Hort Innovation website (www.horticulture.com.au) or direct questions to communication@horticulture.com.au

PCA webinars and tours to resume in 2021

The PCA Board is preparing to host its popular virtual webinar series again in 2021.

As COVID restrictions and border closures ease, a regional tours program is also being developed for 2021. Invitations to join the webinars and tours will be sent to those with PCA membership linked email address.

One of the six proposed tours is a virtual tour says our Tour Program Organiser and PCA Board Director, Shané Steffen, who hopes the first regional tour can go ahead at the end of March in the Stanthorpe region of South-East Queensland. The focus for the tour will be irrigation with a look at ways to capture and recycle run-off and outflow from hydroponic systems.

Popular webinar topics identified from a member survey held earlier this year include protected cropping research, development and extension strategy; trends in protected cropping around the world; new technologies and innovations; plant nutrition; and substrate management. PCA hopes to cover these.

If there is a topic of interest you would like to see featured in the virtual webinar series, email protectedcropping@asnevents.net.au or call (03) 8560 4391.

Tomato congress goes digital



Catch the Global Tomato Congress online.
Photo Adobe Stock Photos

Tomato producers around the world will be able to join in this year's tomato congress from home as the popular event is announced in digital format.

The Global Tomato Congress 2021 will be held online on March 16 and is set to explore the latest innovations in the tomato category with interviews, discussions and talks.

The event is organised by FreshNet. To join in on your computer, tablet or smart phone, register at crowdcomms-ltd.reg.crowdcomms.com/global-tomato-congress.