

MARCH 2021



# Growing Undercover

PROTECTED CROPPING AUSTRALIA MONTHLY NEWSLETTER

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## We want to hear from you!

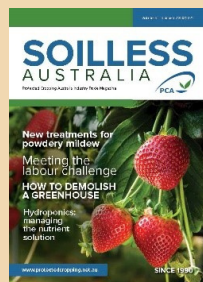
People love hearing about what their peers are up to - and we're always on the lookout for news about what's going on in the Protected Cropping industry.

Our quarterly magazine, Soilless Australia, is a great place to catch up on these stories. The Winter edition is currently being created and rates and deadlines are available to [view here](#).

If you've got something you'd like to share, or there's an issue you'd like addressed, we're all ears!

Please drop our editor, Jennifer Stackhouse a line at: [editor@protectedcropping.net.au](mailto:editor@protectedcropping.net.au)

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## A message from our Chair

**Nicky Mann • PCA Chair**

Welcome to the March 2021 Undercover Newsletter! As the Chair of Protected Cropping Australia and on behalf of our wonderful Board of Directors - I am super excited to announce that PCA will be holding its biennial conference between 25th and 28th October, 2021 at Pacific Resort in Coffs Harbour. Yes, we are trying to be positive and confident that we will be able to pull off this really important event for the benefit of our members, amazing growers & allied trade. We have pushed our conference away from its historical date in June/July to give the situation with COVID19 time to really settle down especially over the cooler months and allow most of us to be vaccinated by October 2021.

As a grower, I really understand that October is a very busy time of the year but hopefully everyone can get away from the farm for a couple of days to connect, re-connect, learn, share and simply enjoy networking with the fabulous people in our industry. I have so missed all your wonderful faces and I know most growers are dying to get off their farms and meet up with suppliers, customers and fellow growers. After the year that we have all had - we really do deserve a break away in a gorgeous sunny location.

We have selected Coffs Harbour this year to support a regional area of Australia and to highlight the amazing growers, packhouses, co-operatives, corporates and people in this part of the world. The farm tours will be diverse and full of great learnings. We hope you can bring your families with you to enjoy the wonderful beachside holiday that Coffs Harbour can offer.

We are so excited to welcome you all and ASN Events will be our Professional Conference Organiser and Emily Rigby is the Conference Chair for this year's events. If you are keen to attend, be a sponsor, exhibitor or speaker or involved in our conference in any way - please contact: Jordyn Trolove at [jordyn.t@asnevents.net.au](mailto:jordyn.t@asnevents.net.au)

See you at the BIG BANANA in October 2021!

# PCA Advocacy Update

**Matthew Plunkett** • M: 0434 147 988

• Deputy Chair, Protected Cropping Australia

[Matthew.plunkett@protectedcropping.net.au](mailto:Matthew.plunkett@protectedcropping.net.au)

In last month's Growing Undercover newsletter, the importance of the PCA advocating for a protected cropping mapping project and the need for better data on the size and value of our industry was discussed.

In this month's article, we look at the importance of building relationships with Hort Innovation, the grower owned Research and Development Corporation, how the levy system works, and the importance of a protected cropping research, development and extension strategy to advance the industry.

## ***How does the levy system work and how are levy funds invested?***

Hort Innovation Statutory levies that are raised by growers are collected by the Australian Government.

The Australian Government has a Statutory Funding Agreement with Hort Innovation, allowing it to pass these collected levies on to Hort Innovation.

Hort Innovation then has the responsibility to work with each horticulture industry to make strategic investments in Research, Development and Extension (R,D&E) and marketing programs, specific to their needs and priorities. All levy investments involve consultation with and advice from industry, delivered through industry-specific Strategic Investment Advisory Panels (SIAPs). Once money is invested, the Australian Government contributes to the costs of these investments by contributing using public funds. Investments from marketing levies do not attract the same contribution from the Australian Government.

The benefits of the investments that are made go directly back to the industry from which the levy was collected, to support increased productivity, profitability, and competitiveness of the sector.

Currently, the PCA are compiling a list of protected cropping research, development, and extension gaps within levied commodities such as vegetables, berries, nurseries and so on. The PCA encourages every member to contribute to the review of these plans in 2021.

The PCA can communicate these gaps on your behalf to the relevant staff within Hort Innovation. Alternatively, members can jump on the website, click on the industry levy commodity page, and download the current strategic plan for review or contact the relevant Hort Innovation staff member to provide input and feedback directly.

The link to these plans can be found at:

<https://www.horticulture.com.au/growers/>

## ***How can levy paying growers submit R&D ideas online?***

At any time, growers who pay levies can submit short research and development concept ideas into the Hort Innovation grower portal. The link to this form can be found at:

<https://edms.horticulture.com.au/Forms/ideas>

Figure - 1 Investment in extension is crucial to communicate research and development projects



Photo Acknowledgement: Jonathan Eccles

## ***What is a Hort Frontiers Funding?***

In addition to levied industry funding, there is the Hort Frontiers funding stream. This funding normally requires multiple partners, significant cash co-contributions from partners and must have cross horticultural industry benefits. Pollination, Fruit Fly, and investment in leadership programs are examples of investment in this funding stream.

The Advanced Production Systems Fund is currently part funding the development of the protected cropping R,D&E strategy outlined below.

Further information on the Hort Frontiers funding can be found at:

<https://www.horticulture.com.au/delivery-partners/funding-consulting-investing/how-hort-frontiers-works/>

## ***Why is a Protected Cropping Research, Development and Extension Strategy important?***

The current PCA Board and staff have advocated strongly for the development of this strategy and provided input into the first draft of the report. The plan will hopefully be released to all our members for further consultation later in the year. This strategy will guide investment priorities over the next 10 years for the protected cropping sector.

The Strategy is being developed by the Queensland Department of Agriculture and Fisheries, and part funded under the Advanced Production Systems Frontiers Fund.

The PCA are also working closely with the Hort Innovations communications team to extend the results of current research projects across different levied commodities and commenced discussions about opportunities to sponsor regional tours and the PCA Conference later in the year.

In closing, communicating the benefits of research and development through more targeted extension programs has been recognised by Hort Innovation as critical to drive practice change and the uptake of levy funded research and development projects.

Stay tuned for further updates in Soilless and please reach out if you require further information.

Warm regards  
Matthew Plunkett

**Acknowledgement-Hort Innovation Page on how the levy system works.**





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

#### **Individual Members**

- Vicky Clarke, Horti-Pride Pty Ltd
- Richard and Tara Decker, Flora Plant
- Singh Gurdeep, Singh Argo Pty Ltd
- Laurence Kirton, AgroSense Pty Ltd
- David Kempster, Integra Water Solutions
- Simon White, CQU

#### **Student Members**

- Riaan van der Merwe

*We look forward to many successful years together!*

## **PCA 2021 Conference**

# **SAVE THE DATE**

# **REGISTRATIONS**

# **OPENING SOON**

**The Protected Cropping Australia 2021 Conference Committee are pleased to announce the 2021 Conference will be hosted in person from 25 - 28 October 2021 at Pacific Bay Resort, Coffs Harbour, NSW.**

Registration and sponsorship for the 2021 Conference will open on *Thursday 1st April 2021*, so please mark your diaries and stay signed up to the PCA mailing list. We look forward to seeing you in Coffs Harbour!



## **Bundaberg Water Crisis Update**

**Shané Steffen • M: 0466 976 399**

• Director, Protected Cropping Australia

[Shane.steffen@protectedcropping.net.au](mailto:Shane.steffen@protectedcropping.net.au)

Rain has been quite the talking point. Some are getting ample, some too much and some none at all. In the Wide Bay Burnett region where I am currently based the dams and ground water are getting low.

Growers have had a nice reprieve with some wonderful rain so it has put everyone in a much better frame of mind. However even across the region it has been patchy, with some getting 100mm and neighbours across the road getting 10mm.

The next cycle of the growing season is swinging into action also and pickers and packers are in demand. Capsicums, beans, eggplants, zucchini, cucumber, chilli's, the list of crops grown here is vast and there is ample opportunity.



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# Government Survey on Skills Reform

Government Survey on Skills Reform - If you're a business owner or manager, complete this short 5-minute survey to have your say on what your business needs from the VET system.

**Complete the survey:** <https://lnkd.in/gynR3Ag>

Find out more about the national Skills Reform agenda at [www.skillsreform.gov.au](http://www.skillsreform.gov.au)



## Dookie Campus proves strong base for ag careers, Haifa Group



The strength of Dookie Agricultural College for developing young rural careers is alive and well, with graduate Emily Corbett already joining the Australian team of one of the world's highest quality water soluble fertiliser manufacturers, Haifa Group.

Emily has been based at her family's apple and pear property at Seville in Victoria's Yarra Valley, and it has been a case of the proverbial fruit not falling far from the tree when it comes to her career aspirations.

Focused on agricultural sciences, the Dookie Campus accommodates about 200 students a year undertaking agricultural degrees. Students have the option to do internships with suitable organisations, while Dookie Campus also runs a mentoring program for students linked with industry partners.

A 2400-hectare working farm located in the productive and diverse agricultural area also provides for plenty of engagement with production agriculture, and has proved vital considering 85pc of students are from metropolitan areas. [Click here](#) to read the full article.

## Hydroponic Fertiliser analysis

Gino Marcon, Marcon Farms, has provided the below Hydroponic Fertiliser analysis.

With some shortages of potash type fertilisers due to Covid, some importers are scrambling to get supplies from Asia. Some crops have suffered from high salinity and thus poor yields. My advice is to not sacrifice quality with price or availability, and to source quality products from Europe or if in doubt have them analysed by an independent and reputable source. In this analysis salt levels were high and potassium levels were 30% of what they should have been. (Potassium Sulfate) The analysis was done by the Government Measures department in Sydney.

Please [click here](#) to view the analysis.

Regards  
Gino Marcon

## Neil Miles named in 40Under40 Class of 2021!



Neil Miles, PCA Board member and business owner of [Planted Passion](#), was named in 40Under40 class of 2021 by WA Business News on Wednesday 10 March. The accolade celebrates Western Australia's top young business talent across a diverse mix of sectors.

Starting with \$200 in the bank and no formal business management experience, Neil Miles has grown Planted Passion from sole-trader status to employing 18 staff over seven years. The growth of this family business has been entirely self-funded. Planted Passion has three agricultural business units in regional WA - Plant Farm, Produce and Agriculture - delivering on either vegetable seedling production; agronomy services and fertiliser product distribution for farmers; or growing wholesale chemical-free produce.

Commencing in 2013 as a gardening service, it was Neil's understanding of agronomy and farm practices which propelled the company's evolution to become a bridge between farmers and specialist products, delivering innovative and sustainable results for agriculture.

Neil's nimble market change response during COVID-19 (acquiring new supply chains) plus retaining annual revenue at \$1 million+ during periods of scaling and pandemic, resulted in acquisition and capital-backing offers. Choosing to remain self-funded and pursue his unwavering passion to improve the agricultural industry, Neil applies in-depth knowledge and gives his time to grow the business of farmers, sharing their goals and dreams.

Neil's core passion is to help others achieve their agricultural goals and maximise profit while improving their business sustainability. Planted Passion works with agriculturalists across WA to achieve improved outcomes. With fresh produce critical to everyday life, Neil uses his own business property to collect data and prove new sustainable farming models. His leadership extends to freely sharing his results of improved agricultural ideologies and transformational practices and products with others.

Neil believes that agriculture in Australia is an undervalued industry and career choice, lacking business and government support. COVID-19 has proven that with no formalised incentives to grow produce, Australia's food security is weak with an impending scarcity. Planted Passion's long-term business forecast includes land expansion by FY 24/25, resulting in 10% contribution to annual agriculture turnover of the Southern Forests Region (currently worth \$250m).

To read more on the 40Under40 Class of 2021 please [click here](#).



# New crops for undercover growing

**Jennifer Stackhouse**

Editor, Soilless Australia

While the amount of undercover space continues to expand across Australia, so does interest in new crops, particularly edibles that can be grown in protected vertical systems. Under trial and gaining a following are crops as varied as saffron, vanilla, pepper, papaya and dragonfruit.

A researcher and consultant with an interest in new crops is New Zealand horticulturist, Mike Nichols. Mike is a retired lecturer from Massey University, who has been working with greenhouse berry fruit for the past 20 years. Mike was one of the first to grow strawberries and blueberries hydroponically in New Zealand and has been a lecturer at conferences in Australia.

He is an Honorary Member of the International Society for Horticultural Science, and in 2015 was presented with a Life Time Achievement Award by Vegetables New Zealand. He recently presented a webinar on new crops for protected cropping to members of PCA.

Mike agrees there's a lot of interest in new crops for protected cropping and much research and trial work is underway but warns growers who are interested in trialing new crops such as saffron to be careful about what he describes as "rubbish research".

He says while there are some exciting new crops under trial, he thinks the future lies in growing fruit crops, particularly tropical and subtropical crops on dwarf rootstock, under cover but also growing high value crops such as cherries in high tunnels to keep the fruit dry at harvest.

Dwarf rootstock makes it easier and cheaper to protect a crop and to harvest it, which is an important factor with today's labour shortages say Mike. He explains that understanding how to manage the climate conditions that initiate fruiting in subtropical and tropical fruit – dry to initiate flowering followed by fruiting – can also mean that it is possible to have year-round fruit production under protected cropping.

## Tropical and subtropical options

High value tropical crops are attracting a lot of interest for protected cropping with trials underway at Wageningen University in The Netherlands on growing both vanilla and pepper undercover.

Vanilla is produce on a climbing orchid. Vanilla is extracted from the elongated bean-shaped seedpod that is dried after harvest. Production is highly labour intensive in tropical areas.

As well as being able to produce a tropical crop outside the tropics by growing it within a protected environment, the grower can also manage the vanillin content of the seedpod. Vanillin is one of the ingredients that give vanilla its flavour. Vanillin could also be used to create a drug to combat the common yeast infection candida.

Vanilla is also being grown in Australia according to a report on ABC Landline. David Soo is growing 350 vanilla plants in a geodesic dome greenhouse on the New South Wales Central Coast.

Pepper is another tropical crop with potential for the protected cropping industry. Research is underway to assess the viability of pepper (*Piper nigrum*) production as this spice is in high demand in Europe for both quantity and quality.

Papaya or pawpaw (*Carica papaya*), to be sold both green as a vegetable and ripe as a fruit, is another crop under trial for protected cropping. This fruit is traditionally produced commercial in the tropics and widely grown in subtropical and even frost-free temperate areas in Australia. Papaya is grown under cover in Almeria in Spain.

## More information

For more information on new crops, see the Autumn issue of [Soilless Australia](#) magazine (pages 18-21).

*Image: Saffron is the world's most expensive spice and a plant that could have potential for being grown in a protected cropping environment.*



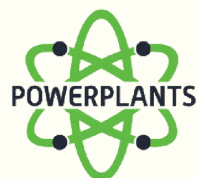
## Hort Innovation - Refreshing the Strategic Investment Plans

Hort Innovation is refreshing the roadmaps that will guide each industry's strategic levy investment over the next five years.

The refreshed Strategic Investment Plans (SIPs) 2022-2026 will provide the roadmaps to guide Hort Innovation's investment of levies and Australian Government contributions, ensuring investment decisions are aligned with industry priorities. The SIP lays the foundation for decision making in levy investments and represents the balanced interest of the particular industry from which the levy is collected. The most important function of the SIP is to make sure that levy investment decisions align with industry priorities.

For further information, please [click here](#).

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