

## **Staying Competitive (and in Business) as a Small Nursery<sup>©</sup>**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Nursery owners can be considered as being on a spectrum from “factory owners” producing large numbers of perfect plants of a low range of taxa to “plant lovers” who love growing plants for others to enjoy. The former have capital intensive operations with the prime consideration being profit per plant. This is good business but does not require a particular affinity for plants, although that is not necessarily absent.

The plant lovers grow plants primarily because they have a passion for them and want to see them grown and enjoyed by others. They are often running small nurseries and compared to the past very few of them are left. Obviously to stay in business and to continue growing and distributing the plants they love they must make a profit.

I consider myself to be more of a plant lover having grown up in Western Australia (WA), one of the world’s great biodiversity hotspots, with a huge range of species, many of which occur nowhere else and are also quite spectacular in flower.

### **STAYING IN BUSINESS**

There are only a few people who are still growing these great Western Australia (WA) plants; so many have ceased for a number of reasons.

These include:

- **Increasing Value of Land.** It’s no longer worth growing plants compared to profits to be gained from selling the land.
- **Costs of Inputs.** Western Australia has endured a “boom” in mining activity and to get anything done requires work from people who have had prices inflated by mining companies’ activities and effects.
- **Decreasing Suburban Block Sizes and Bigger Houses on Those Blocks.** Not the room to plant plants anymore.
- **Changing Culture.** Whereas gardening used to be considered an enjoyable hobby in the past, the current generation generally seem to consider it a tiresome chore. People are too impatient to do work now and wait for things to grow before they can get the benefits.
- **Rise of Box Stores.** Many interesting small retail nurseries have been squeezed out by homogenous box chains all selling the same stuff to an uncaring public.
- **Factory Wholesalers.** They’re good businessmen and plant growers - just boring, with a limited range of plants at a low price.
- **Difficulty of Obtaining and Retaining Skilled Labour.** Mining boom again.
- **Discounting.** Too much stock is dumped and drags prices down for everyone else.

### **SOME THE THINGS WE ARE DOING**

So then, wanting to continue to produce interesting plants but needing to turn a profit in a tight market what are the things we are doing, and wanting to do in the future, to keep ourselves competitive.

The first thing we see as a competitive advantage is our use of a range of propagation facilities.

An old brick sided tunnel, unheated and a bit drier with respect to fogging, produces great results with WA natives especially some of the trickier grevilleas (Fig. 1).

A second poly tunnel has little ventilation and gets too hot for most purposes but produces excellent results with tropical grevilleas and some South African leucospermums (Fig. 2).



Fig. 1. This is the old, low tech prop shed.



Fig. 2. This is the hot tunnel, good for another range of plants especially tropical grevilleas.

A third facility has most of the modern applications, including automatic venting, extraction fans, and aluminiumised shade screens above the plants (Fig. 3). These screens can be set to open and close automatically but in practise are left shut in summer and open in winter. In this tunnel we have Netafim misters on the plants and a fogging system in the upper space to help cool the structure in hot weather, which is a large part of the year

in WA. With a gas-fired hot-water system providing bottom heat another whole range of plants can also be successfully grown in this tunnel.

The second thing we see as an advantage is the use of a range of approaches with seed germination.



Fig. 3. “Bells and whistles” facility good for most cutting grown plants.

Many WA natives have dormancies that need to be overcome and a range of methods must be employed. We are constantly experimenting to discover ways of improving germination or maybe even any germination.

Methods include:

- Direct Heat. Using direct heat in an oven at 120° for half an hour or more.
- Smoke Treatments. Treatment with smoke water and/or direct application of smoke. The discovery of the effect of smoke on many WA natives, especially monocots, has probably been the single biggest breakthrough in germination.
- Using Refrigeration. Many WA natives are designed to only germinate in winter when follow up rain is likely and temperatures are cooler. These natives respond to a period of chilling prior to sowing. Banksias are very particular about this.
- Physical Scarification. In the past many genera were treated with hot water to crack hard seed coats. We have greatly improved germination with physical means instead of the heat.
- Weathering. Leave the seed trays for long periods – sometimes two years or more.

There are other small things we do that we believe help keep us in the business. These include:

- Using a small diesel burner to generate steam to sterilise all containers before they are reused. We save a lot of money reusing pots. We also believe in recycling the pots to keep them out of landfill which is where so many end up.
- Growing nearly all of our cuttings in a 100 cell tray and instead of dibbling holes individually we have made a board of MDF (medium density fibreboard) with 100 large screws in the right pattern to place on the tray and make all the holes at once (Fig. 4).
- We have a program and printer from Tytag Australia to print many of our own labels. This was just for emergencies and short runs however with a recent corporate takeover in the Australian label printing industry one of the two main companies has become almost unusable. We are now making more of our own than ever. Although the cost is

similar to commercial labels and the quality is not quite as good, they are far better than nothing and a great aid to our business.

- We do most of our own welding. I did a 5 week night-school course and learned enough that we are able to make our own trolleys, benches (Fig. 5), and many repairs. All plants are grown on benches to make them easier to work on and to keep them above splash zones for better hygiene. The construction method we have evolved over the years gives us a sturdy bench at a reasonable cost and is good for our business.
- Something else we do but which can be a two edged sword is that we grow a number of species that are difficult to propagate and have low survival percentages. We are obviously always trying to improve these percentages. Several of these plants are only grown by us. While it is unlikely we make any money out of these they give us something special to sell to our best customers and they give us a certain credibility as the only place you can get some of these desirable, hard-to-get plants. We look at them the way a supermarket looks at a “lost leader.”

In this vein we have spent several years finding out how to grow grafted *Corymbia ficifolia* plants. *Corymbia ficifolia* is a WA native, endemic to a few hundred acres near the south coast but now widely grown in temperate climates around the world. It has a range of flower colours which cannot be predicted when grown from seed. They can also take 10 years or more to flower from seed. Red is generally the most desirable colour and people will pay a good premium to know they are getting a red-flowering tree. Grafting has become the best way of producing plants with a known flower colour.



Fig. 4. Dibble 100 holes at a time.



Fig. 5. Make your own benches.

Several years ago when the myrtle rust was discovered in eastern Australia imports of all myrtaceous material was prohibited into Western Australia. Many grafted gums were being produced in eastern Australia, imported to WA and used widely but the supply was stopped overnight. Having worked out how to do them in good numbers we are now profiting from our research in this area.

Finally a big tip and advantage that we have is that we are active members of IPPS. This is a marvellous organisation, full of friendly helpful people who have been extremely generous with advice and information that has given us a head start in many ways. The more you put into it the more you get out of it!

