

## An Australian Experience!®

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Gerard Hoogendoorn, Jac Duif, Karen Eichholtz, Coleen Cronje, and Mornet de Jager (the latter being two sisters) were fortunate to be part of a great and wonderful “Down Under” experience.

We arrived in Brisbane on Tuesday the 16th of May 2006, after a harrowing and exhausting flight. Imagine that! Thirty hours to get to the other end of the world! At least this was the opinion of the girls. The men consoled themselves with the profusions of meals (or so it seemed).

We booked in at the Carlton Crest Hotel where the Australian I.P.P.S. Region conference was held and were delighted to find the hotel clean and refreshingly welcoming. To our dismay, we discovered that we would only be allowed to enter our rooms at 12 noon. This left us dragging our feet around a few blocks of Brisbane, until we were able to flop down on our beds after a cleansing shower.

Refreshed and revived the following morning, Brisbane impressed us with its very well organised public transport system. For only \$5 a day, unlimited river, bus, and train transport was available. This left us giddy with a sense of long lost freedom and everywhere to go! Soon we discovered that this city had a feeling of a small town with vast amounts of sidewalk space, friendly people, and half a zillion sidewalk cafes. We vowed to try them all, but failed dismally. You can only eat so much!

On Wednesday a small tour was organised (we suspect to humour the wide-eyed South Africans to book). We departed early, with a few new friends in tow, to Pohlmanns Nursery. The nursery comprises of 60 ha of which 14 ha is devoted to intensive plant production. The remaining area is dedicated to commercial orchard growing of mangoes, avocados, and grapes. The business employs up to 185 people during peak season. The product range is marketed through major retail grocery chains department stores, hardware, nursery groups, and garden centres. The plants produced ranged from ornamentals and herbs to seedlings. Even an abundance of our own *Gerbera* species is grown as pot plants for the retail market.

Our next stop was at the University of Queensland centre for native floriculture. Here we visited their tissue culture lab, potting and propagation unit, and an impressive, totally electronically controlled environment. This is a north-south orientated hothouse — not particularly affordable for commercial growing, but very helpful in research.

The centres for Native Floriculture’s main objectives are:

- To build commercially focused native floriculture industries in Queensland.
- To identify and develop commercial opportunities for these native industries.

- To lead innovative research that supports the development of Queensland's native floriculture industries.
- To identify, develop and maintain partnerships and alliances that create new business and employment opportunities.
- To encourage the sustainable use of Queensland's biodiversity and expand knowledge of our native flora.

After lunch (if you are in love with deep fried stuff — a sumptuous feast), which was sponsored by the Australian I.P.P.S. Region, we left for Highsun Express's latest hothouse complex. It is a new facility with the latest in technology in hothouse equipment — seed planting, tray filling machines, automated heating watering system, and roller benches with tracks; from the planting shed to the hothouse and out to dispatch, to help cut down on labour.

The minimum wage per person is \$2,000 per month, and unskilled labour is pretty rare in Australia. In the horticultural sector, mainly skilled labour is used. Highsun Express produces a great quantity of lisianthus and gerberas in trays.

Next we visited Toowoomba University Centre, Boyce Garden and Rainforest. This garden, forest, and park covers 6 ha, is 60 years old, and is entrusted to the University of Queensland for the enjoyment and education of the people of Australia. More than 700 species of flowering trees, shrubs, and perennials grow here. With the drought that the whole of Australia is currently facing, even the bore hole, tapped by a large windmill (26-m tower, 7-m wheel) has run dry. This left the garden somewhat under pressure. Fortunately, town water may be used as a backup. Mulching also goes a long way in saving moisture and is commonly used in gardens throughout Australia.

Thursday had an executive meeting on the schedule, attended by Jac Duif — poor guy. This, of course, left the rest of us free to entertain ourselves, and although we felt suitable guilty, Brisbane was left covered by our footprints.

The Brisbane Botanical Garden is — considering the drought — absolutely worthwhile visiting with a wide range of South African plants, as well as a great range of ferns and tropical plants.

A horticultural show, similar to our Gardenex was also visited. We concluded that it had almost the same concept and products available.

The cocktail party at the closure of a day well spent, (both in meetings and out) was our first opportunity to “seek and share” with our Australian counterparts.

The I.P.P.S. conference, the main purpose of our visit, was held from Friday to Sunday.

This was found to be very well organised with the infamous “six pack” (upcoming students in the industry) running around and doing most of the work. Our own exchange student, Sean Gildenhuys, stood us proud and made a very good impression on the Australian delegates. At this point: heartfelt thanks to Greg McPhee for arranging Sean's trip.

John Hall from Crop Tech was the keynote speaker at the conference, on integrated crop management. The technical session on root system development, investigated the use of copper compounds as root pruning agents.

Root systems on cutting-raised *Eucalyptus* sp. are influenced by cutting size and stock plant treatment, seedling root system development, and air pruning techniques. This was followed by a session on Papertech plugs for propagation.

We then departed on a nursery tour. On arrival at Redlands Nursery we had lunch and were then split up into groups and at designated points, attended workshop sessions on cuttings, pesticides, and herbicides.

Our next stop was at Highsun Express Plugs where we were taken through their whole production system. The most impressive part was the Papertech propagation technology machine. It is a propagation system with plugs of biodegradable paper filled with a growth medium. This system is suitable for any type of vegetative cuttings, trees, ornamental shrubs, and pot and bedding plants. This is an extremely suitable mechanical transplanting machine that allows fast transplanting, and greatly reduces transplant shock. The biodegradable paper facilitates perfect root penetration and results in fast healthy root development as the plant roots can breathe. It maintains fibrous and hair roots, not just water roots, and eliminates mud balls. The concept reduces rooting time by 3–12 days! Unfortunately we arrived at Mt. Cotton Rainforest Gardens for dinner and drinks as the sun was setting and could not enjoy the real splendour of the gardens.

Saturday we had a morning sessions on water management, with a very interesting talk on irrigation sensing system, all connected wireless to a computer database. This is being used at Redlands Nursery with great success. As well as a talk on water recycling, irrigation options for the nursery from an environmental perspective and a talk on quality improvements for irrigation followed.

The third session was on the propagation environment which included a talk on the effect of environment on tissue culture propagation and “My South African Experience” by Cath Donlan (Australian exchange student to South Africa). She really had a great time in South Africa and reported back on lessons learned from our industry. She also mentioned the friends made and how astonished she was at the fact that so many people works at a nursery, as unskilled labour is not at all common in Australia.

A paper on the effect of light quality on plant growth, inslab bench heating, and improvement of propagation hygiene to cut maintenance costs was also held.

After lunch we departed on a tour of Roma Street Parklands (on foot). This is the world's largest subtropical garden in a city centre, consisting of 16 ha. The garden consists of 28 different gardens: from a traditional Brisbane garden to a Lilly Pilly garden, zig-zag garden, lower epiphytes, and many more. It is also a setting for barbeques, family cricket matches, and weddings.

That evening we had a traditional conference dinner and awards presentation.

On the third and final day the fourth session was held on propagation. This included the effect of mulch on soil, tapping our biodiversity (the future of native plants in horticulture in Queensland), and a paper on the greenhouse facilities of the centre of native floriculture (which we visited on our second day). The fifth and final session was on organic remedies for disease management.

With the conference at an end, the five eager South Africans still had not had enough and left by hired vehicle on a 1000 km trip to Sydney. Greg McPhee organized a few visits to nurseries (wholesale and retail) and we were invited to a dinner with his family. His hospitality and friendliness was always appreciated!

We also had some time to visit scenic places such as Byron Bay and the most eastern point of Australia.

Ron and Deby Dyckes showed us their nursery's water circulation, purification, and evaporation system, which proves to be simple yet effective. Dylon McPhee's

Advantage Plant production nursery has a highly successful propagating system for propagating lavenders.

On our way to Sydney we also visited Blackbutt Reserve and even touched a koala bear, which was a once in a lifetime experience. A special thanks to David Dayly who organized this experience for us! We also visited Select Plants (David's nursery), which specialises in hibiscus. He then sent us on our way to Sydney on the last leg of our tour!

In Sydney we visited the botanical garden and, of course, the famous opera house. Sadly this brought our trip to an end. Australia (with I.P.P.S. as a very viable and worthwhile excuse) is certainly worth a visit!