

South African Exchange 2010[©]

David Parlby

Warren Park Nursery, 100 Boundary Road, Narre Warren East, Vic 3804, Australia

Email: daveparlby@vic.chariot.net.au

INTRODUCTION

From 1 May to 21 May 2010 I visited South Africa as part of the IPPS exchange program. I had some idea of what I was in for before I left Australia, however I was still amazed at some of the things I saw and did.

South Africa has an official population of around 50 million; however I was told unofficially it would be closer to 70 million. The extra 20 million unaccounted comes from illegal immigrants coming over the border to find work. When I first arrived in Johannesburg I saw many wonderful housing developments, shopping centres, and other life style developments. At this point I thought this is a good sign; however I was then told that the global financial crisis (GFC) had hit the country quite hard. Many of these housing developments had come to a halt and very few people shopped at the new shopping centres.

MAJOR DIFFERENCES IN THE INDUSTRY

While touring around many of the nurseries I visited (close to 20) I was able to obtain a good idea on how different the Australian and South African nursery industries are. The major difference was the labour usage. Since the labour is so cheap in South Africa nurseries aren't concerned in hiring more staff to keep production moving. In some cases they don't even interview there staff before hiring them.

There is an increased number of staff used because the nurseries in South Africa aren't mechanised like some nurseries are in Australia. In South Africa they would use 10 (or more) people to do what 3–4 people and a potting machine would do in Australia. One staff member told me that they hope nurseries don't start using machines because it will put many people out of a job.

The main question each owner would ask each other when they would meet was "how is the new potting mix formula/pre-mixed bags going." The reason why they would ask this is they don't have access to potting mix like Australia does. Most would mix their own using various ingredients including: Fresh saw dust, pine bark shavings, quarry dust, compost, soil, and the list could go on. Many nurseries have tried to use composed pine bark, however the grade and quality is too inconsistent. Coir is starting to be used quite heavily in many mixes; again quality is an issue (salt levels).

Access to material in general was an issue for all nurseries I visited, in Australia we can call our nearest supplier and have the product at our door step in 24 h. In South Africa many products come from overseas and require many months notice before the product is needed. Cheap, Cheap, Cheap. I think this would be what most nursery owners would be thinking, however in South Africa the term "cheap" can sacrifice the "quality" of the plant. The term quality is at a different level to what it is in Australia. Some nurseries I visited just want to mass produce their product quickly and cheaply and still sell their product. I would be guessing that the customer wants a cheap product and isn't too worried what it looks like.

LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL

After attending the IPPS conference in South Africa I realise there was so much enthusiasm surrounding this industry. Many of the delegates were talking about what improvements they would be making to their businesses once the economy improved. Some mentioned they might even start to look at mechanising parts of the nurseries. Others said it would be good to put some money back into their businesses for general improvements (clean up, weed control).

Labour control and knowledge of what tasks were being undertaken was lacking, however Sittig Nursery was one of the leaders in this area. Hans Sittig was one of the only owners I met that had an idea on what was going on in his nursery. Before Hans would implement any new processes he would see if it needed to be changed or if the new process was more efficient.

Arnelia Nursery also was like a well oiled machine, Hans Hettich and his team run a tight ship. The main reason I was so impressed with Arnelia was the innovations which Hans introduced to his nursery. Hans knew exactly what he wanted, however South Africa couldn't supply everything for him. So instead of giving up he would work out a way of doing it himself.

RETAIL

I didn't just visit production nurseries while in South Africa, I had the opportunity to visit a number of the retail nurseries. The retail nurseries were struggling as much as the production nurseries, one owner said to me he couldn't wait for the bulbs to come into the store then he could start getting some income. Some retail nurseries started to open cafes to bring more customers in; unfortunately most would only come in for a coffee and not buy any plants.

Marketing was lacking in the retail stores, plants would be grouped depending on type. There was very little colourful signage and plants generally looked boring. There needed to be more excitement surrounding the plants.

This trip was such a great opportunity for me to be able to see how another culture tackles what I would consider a tough but exciting industry. There looks like there are so many possibilities in this industry and once the public understands that a plant is more than just a thing in a pot, it could open so many doors for the South African industry.