

**Maintain and enhance
the Australian Garden
Centre Accreditation
Scheme**

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Nursery & Garden Industry
Australia (NGIA)

Project Number: NY04031 & NY04500

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**Nursery & Garden Industry
Australia**

Final Report

HAL project: NY04031 & NY04500

Completion date 31 August 2005

**Maintain and Enhance the
Australian Garden Centre
Accreditation Scheme.**

**Maintain, enhance and market the
Australian Garden Centre
Accreditation Scheme.**

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Final Report

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Media Summary

The Australian Garden Centre Accreditation Scheme (AGCAS) is an industry managed program that aims to improve best management practice within the garden centre segment of the retail sector of the nursery and garden industry. The scheme focuses heavily on assisting businesses to provide consumers with the garden products retail experience. The scheme presently accredits 117 nationally and has shown a 6% growth over the period that this report represents.

Projects NY0431 & NY04500 have been driven by the Annual Operating Plan for AGCAS. This AOP had provision for individual business and state based expenditure (via the state industry associations and Advisory Committees) as well as a nationally managed operations. The AOP is comprised of administrative functions, scheme development activity and marketing - to both prospective accredited businesses and consumers.

As a result of deliberations of the National AGCAS Advisory Committee at its August 2004 meeting, the AOP was modified from previous year's activity to provide a greater focus on consumer awareness of the scheme and its participants. Previously, almost 60% of the project was directed at communications via trade events. General consumer research had identified that although awareness levels of accreditation of some garden centres averaged 51%, 58% of all respondents considered it "Neither important nor unimportant", "Not very important" or "Not at all important". The 2004/05 project allocations realigned this to place greater emphasis on direct to consumer communications.

Key elements undertaken within the 2004/05 Annual Operating Plan included:

- Establishment of a quarterly newsletter to AGCAS members.
- Design, production and distribution of additional point-of-sale posters for use in accredited garden centres
- The development of a 'Selling Kit' for Garden Centre Development Officers
- Numerous state based initiatives to promote the scheme to the public and to prospective businesses.

- The uptake by individual businesses of the offer to co-fund cooperative advertising arrangements that promoted AGCAS to the public.
- National consumer advertising through gardening publications
- Advertising in the Australian Open Garden annual magazine
- Development and implementation of a national consumer promotion via a partnership with a national print gardening publisher. The campaign ran for four months from April – July 2005 and included editorial content espousing the merits of shopping at an Accredited Garden Centre and listing each AGCAS member.
- Development and distribution of point of sale materials to support the national promotional campaign.
- Various state initiated retailer workshops
- Organisation and completion of two National AGCAS Advisory Committee meetings in August 2004 (Melbourne) and February 2005.(Sydney).
- General administration of the scheme.

In the area of consumer communication, additional work is underway to build on the Autumn 2005 campaign and this will be an extension of the scheme under this project.

Further to the above activity, under this project the National AGCAS Committee also resolved in developing the scheme by incorporating the draft Environmental Management System into its guidelines and to improve the awareness and positioning of the scheme with consumers.

Introduction

The Australian Garden Centre Accreditation Scheme (AGCAS) was launched at the end of 2000 and currently there are 118 accredited garden centres nationally. The main aim of the scheme is to improve industry standards in the retailing of gardening products (greenlife, growing media and allied products) via the frontline contact point of the industry with its consumers. This project aims to induce industry participation in the scheme by improving benefits for membership and by raising consumer awareness of the scheme's existence, its benefits to consumers and the participating garden centres.

AGCAS is one of the three formal accreditation schemes sanctioned by the industry and specifically identified within the Nursery & Garden Industry Australia strategic plan as "building better businesses by raising industry standards through accreditation. The key principle underpinning this strategic aim is to drive industry toward best management practice through the mechanism of accreditation.

In recent years, several research initiatives have touched on aspects of AGCAS, both with industry consumers and the scheme's own membership. The feedback from the scheme's membership indicates that it is falling short in meeting member expectations, most notably in the area of public awareness of the scheme.¹ This is supported by research conducted with consumers in Spring 2001 and again in Autumn 2004². The following tables demonstrate these findings:

¹ Creative Dialogue Pty Ltd (2003), *"A Review of Members' Attitudes Towards AGCAS"*

² Creative Dialogue Pty Ltd (2004), *"A Study of Gardening Behaviour & Attitudes in the Context of Water Restrictions"*

<i>Q: "Are you aware that some Garden Centres are accredited by the Nursery and Garden Industry?"</i>		
A: Yes aware	Spring 2001	Autumn 2004
	%	%
Perth	45	62
Brisbane	49	50
Adelaide	51	50
Sydney	49	46
Melbourne	59	42
TOTAL	51	50

<i>Q: "How important to you is it that a garden centre is accredited?"</i>		
A: Yes aware	Spring 2001	Autumn 2004
	%	%
Base	604	600
Very important	13	10
Quite important	29	28
Neither important nor unimportant	24	21
Not very important	23	28
Not at all important	11	13
TOTAL	100	100
Average Score	3.10	2.92

Score : Very important = 5, Not at all important = 1

Technical Report

Operational components of this report are detailed below and are an expansion of activities that have been outlined in the Media Summary.

Administration

Within the Annual Operating Plan (AOP) of the program for the funding period of this project, 2 meetings of the National AGCAS Advisory Committee were held. They were held on 17/18 August 2004 in Melbourne and on 22/23 February in Sydney. The proceedings of these meetings have been fully minuted and resolutions provided to the

NGIA Executive for its consideration. Also coinciding with these meetings were meetings of the Garden Centre Development Officer network.

Each state association has its own advisory committee. The National AGCAS Committee has recommended that each state committee meets at least 4 times per year.

Administrative Criteria

Under the life of this project a review and rewrite of the Administrative Criteria and the Terms and Conditions governing the scheme and its membership was to take place. This exercise has been carried out by the scheme's sister program NIASA and based on the result of that work AGCAS will conduct its review. To date NIASA has not finalised its Administration Criteria and therefore the review under this project is still pending.

National AGCAS Advisory Committee

During the course of this project, several changes to the make up of the National AGCAS Advisory Committee took place:

Mrs Sandy Martin replaced Ms Jill Black as the NGIQ representative.

Mr Paul Rawlings participated as the February 2005 meeting representative for NGISA.

Other members of the National Advisory Committee are:

Mr Peter Whitehead – NSW

Mr. Michael Linton – Vic.

Mr Roy Stoneman – Tas

Mrs Jackie Hooper – WA

Mrs Estelle Cornell- NT

Ms Joanne Harris – NGIA (Chairperson)

Outcomes

Best Management Practice

Over the two National Advisory Committee meetings held, development of the Best Management Practice guidelines was considered. Of particular merit appeared to be discussion of the possible inclusion of components of the Environmental Management System developed by industry for retailers. Gauging from the resultant sentiment from each of the meetings with respect to the issue of environmental responsibility, future AOP's will take into account the desire to progress the scheme in this direction.

Member Communications

As identified in the AOP, an AGCAS specific newsletter was developed. "*The Leader*", as it is titled, is a four page information package that is written, printed and mailed directly to each accredited garden centre on a quarterly basis. It covers topical matters relating to best practice and key information about the scheme and its ongoing development.

Extension Activities

The major component of extension activity within the AGCAS scheme for the funding period being reported was conducted by the Development Officer network. These included state based promotion of the scheme at industry events, training workshops in specific garden centre retailing operations, and one-to-one advice to business owners, management and staff.

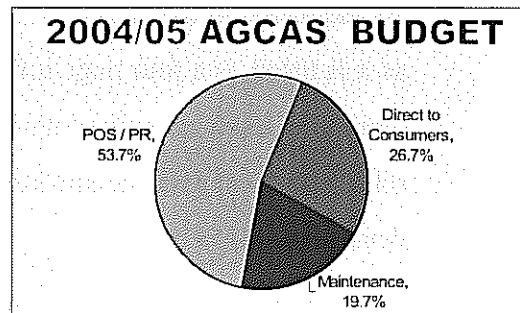
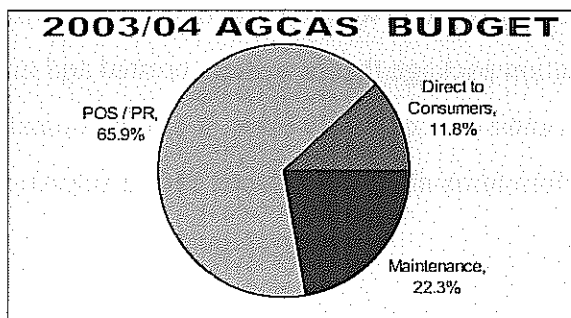
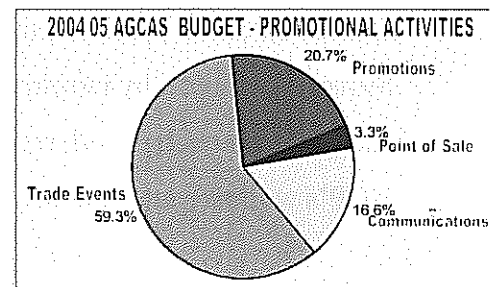
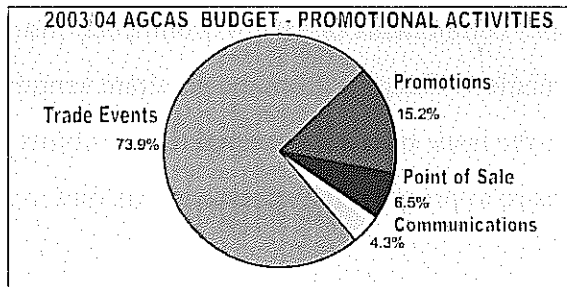
To assist Development Officers explain the merits of AGCAS to potentially creditable businesses in the field, a "selling kit" was developed using feedback and input from Garden Centre Development Officers themselves. This provides GCDO's with a full suite of information that enables them to on-the-spot answer questions and provide businesses with significant detail relating to the scheme and its benefits. Further to this, a leave behind brochure and a consumer brochure were also developed, printed and distributed.

Marketing

The Promotions Mix

At the commencement of this project the apportionment of funds within the Annual Operating Plan was considered by the National Advisory Committee. As a result, the mix of funding activity was altered to reflect a greater emphasis on direct promotion and communication of the scheme to consumers as opposed to investing in trade events.

The charts below demonstrate the changes in expenditure allocations:



Consumer Communication

As a result of more funds being applied for consumer communication, the execution of a major consumer promotion and magazine advertorial campaign took place between April – July 2005 through partnering a national consumer gardening publication “*Gardening Australia*” (GA).

Advertorial – Each edition of the GA magazine between April – June 2005 carried a full page advertorial focussing on key consumer benefits in dealing with an Accredited Garden Centre:

- April 2005 - Accredited Garden Centres are **Top Nurseries**
- May 2005 - Accredited Garden Centres are **Problem Solvers**
- June 2005 - Accredited Garden Centres are **Water-Wise Experts**
- July 2005 - Accredited Garden Centres are **Design Specialists**

The advertorials provided detail as to why Accredited Garden Centres are the superior customer experience within the industry.

National Consumer Promotion – In conjunction with GA editorial, a redemption style prize promotion was conducted with the objective to raise awareness and increase traffic at Accredited Garden Centres (AGC). The mechanics of the promotion were based on a lottery format, whereby entry could only occur by mailing a filled in coupon available from the GA magazine accompanied by a proof of purchase from an AGC. The major prize had been negotiated with Scenic Tours and was a holiday valued at \$15,000 from a selection of three overseas destinations. There were also runner-up prizes for each state and territory for gardening products from an AGC to the value of \$500 each.

In-store Point of Sale Materials – Again in conjunction with the editorial and promotion communication via the GA magazine, a series of in-store communication materials were design, printed and distributed to each AGC. These included:

- A2 posters
- A4 standing posters,
- Pads of official entry forms
- Weather repellent shelf talkers / wobblers

Other Communication

Other marketing activity included three full page advertisements promoting generally AGCAS and NIASA that were taken in the Rural Press' trade publication *Australian Horticulture*. In addition to this, and continuing on from the previous year, a double-page advertisement was purchased in the annual publication of the *Australian Open Garden Scheme* magazine and list of scheduled dates.

Other state based communications activity included various state based participation in garden shows (eg MIFGS' Accreditation Avenue) and matched funded localised advertising.

Further planning for ongoing communications activity for AGCAS is underway.

Point of Sale

The Annual Operating Plan also made provision for the development of additional point of sale materials that are generic for the scheme and have broad application for all AGC's. During 2004-05, two new A4 posters were developed, printed and distributed to all AGC's. The theme of these posters reflected aspects of gardening safety and now form part of the range of point of sale promotional materials available for purchase by industry.

Additionally, the design and production of pop up display units to be used by GCDO's were executed and distributed to each state association to assist in promoting AGCAS.

Evaluation

In assessing the progress and success of the Australian Garden Centre Accreditation Scheme over the period of this project, the number of participating garden centres has increased. The reason for this are due in large part to the effect of two regionally based influences:-

- In Western Australia the effect of the WA Water Corp's Water Wise Garden Centre program being linked to AGCAS in that state has heightened consumer awareness of AGCAS and Garden Centres are now more compelled to participate.
- In Tasmania, the state government has linked funding subsidies to industry best practice and therefore more garden centres have a preparedness to embark upon the AGCAS best management practice road.

Discussion

Clearly, efforts to improve consumer awareness of the existence of the scheme, those businesses participating in the scheme and the key consumer benefits of patronising such businesses is very important to the future prosperity of AGCAS. In addition to creating greater consumer awareness, opportunities exist for generating a strategic and

commercial role for the adoption of Environmental Management Systems under the auspices of best management practice in Australian garden centres. Both these issues should be focal activity addressed by the implementation of the next Annual Operating Plan for the scheme.

Recommendations

In subsequent Annual Operating Plans improvement in the leverage of funds invested in marketing activity should be an aim. This was discussed and agreed as a way forward by the National AGCAS Committee. This will mean the discontinuation of matching funds support for individual businesses in preference for a greater leverage of these funds at a state and national level.

It is also recommended that the Environmental Management System for garden centres developed under another HAL project should be refined and moulded so that it can be included as a component of best management practice within the AGCAS scheme. Its inclusion should also aim to deliver salient consumer value so that it provides improved marketability of the scheme to consumers and in turn to industry.

Acknowledgments

This report acknowledges the input by the Garden Centre Development Officer network, the commitment of time and energy of the various AGCAS advisory committee members in each state and at a national level, and the involvement of Mr. Stuart Burgess of HAL.

