



Nursery & Garden Industry
Australia

Grower case study

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Incremental changes add up to a better bottom line for Domus

Introduction

Colin Groom firmly believes the little things add up, and he's constantly looking for new ways to do things better at Domus Nursery, on the outskirts of Perth.

A strong advocate of the need for the industry to strive for constant improvement, Mr Groom says there's a good financial incentive behind many of the changes encouraged through best management practice schemes.

Domus was started by Colin's father Brian in 1973, and has grown to a medium sized nursery with staff numbers up around 30. Growing a wide range of plants from Australian natives to exotic varieties, Domus supplies garden centres, landscapers, government agencies and hardware chains, with Bunnings a very substantial customer.

Since 2001, Domus has been accredited under the Nursery Industry Accreditation Scheme Australia (NIASA), as well as certified under the environmental module, EcoHort™, for the last four years.



Figure 1 Colin Groom, Domus Nursery

Good for business, good for the environment

Mr Groom says sound business management is just as important as growing good plants, when it comes to running a successful business.

"I couldn't put a dollar figure on any one of the benefits from being NIASA accredited, or certified through EcoHort; it's more about making you think more carefully about

everything you do, and being constantly aware of the costs of various practices," Mr Groom said.

"For instance, we have recycled our water for many years, which is good environmental practice – but we also wouldn't have enough water to survive if we didn't."

"We moved from an old system that diverted drainage water into a small dam to a new system that pumps this water into a large, enclosed storage tank.



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“This move eliminated the issue of blocked pumps and occurrence of algae which, in turn, resulted in less backflushing of sand filters and less consumption of chlorine.”

Meanwhile, the business is in the middle of a state forest.

“We had Jarrah dieback present around us, and then we decided to grow Australian natives – many of which are susceptible. This meant we had to think very carefully about hygiene so we weren’t circulating pathogens in the water,” Mr Groom said.

“NIASA has helped us look at different water treatment methods, and be aware of new options that come on the market.

“We’ve previously used liquid sodium hypochlorite, and now we utilise calcium hypochlorite as it is safer for our plants and staff to handle. We are always searching for better options, hence trialing ozone at the moment to pre-treat our recycled water.

“A lot has changed over the years, and I’d like to think we would have become more sophisticated and better run regardless, but being part of these schemes really pushes you to keep improving all the time.”

Reducing waste is a big focus for the business, as the costs are constantly rising.

“Our used pots are currently being sent to a plastic recycler, which is both good for the environment and good business sense, as it’s cheaper than sending them to landfill.

“We’ve received enquiries from other nurseries about what we’re doing with our pots; I do my best to assist others where possible.

“Keeping up to date with the latest industry news and information is a great place to start for any nursery looking to adopt new practices.”

Changing practices: moving from cardboard to stillages

Mr Groom has also recently broken with West Australian tradition and started using stillages instead of cardboard boxes to transport plants from the east coast.

“Most nurseries over east use stillages or trolleys anyway, but common practice is to use cardboard boxes for shipments to WA so you don’t have to pay for return freight.



Figure 2 Domus Dam 2013



Figure 3 Domus Storage Tank 2017



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“However, the Nullarbor isn’t the best environment for plants, and the combination of heat and lack of ventilation was making them sweat and die. On top of that, many were being squashed because the cardboard didn’t provide enough protection from transport companies.

“We were throwing out enough plants to start looking for alternatives, and the numbers added up to invest in stillages.

“The cost of sending back an empty stillage is about the same as new boxes for each trip. You have the capital cost of buying them on top of that – but we’ve reduced our plant losses by approximately 80 per cent, and reduced labour costs at each end to pack and unpack the plants, so we’re way in front.”

Lessons learnt



Figure 4 Domus Nursery, WA.

Mr Groom says some of the benefits of going through the NIASA and EcoHort programs aren’t immediately obvious, but they’re definitely there.

“It comes back to trying to ensure optimum growing conditions at every stage of the process – quality growing media, correct fertiliser, suitable growing areas, and clean water – to produce a quality product in the end.

“The programs provide our staff with a best practice framework to operate within, and these improvements have flowed through to many areas of the business.

“In many ways it’s an insurance policy, because you’re monitoring and managing everything more carefully and therefore more likely to pick up problems before they become major.”

EcoHort™ and NIASA were developed by Nursery & Garden Industry Australia in partnership with Horticulture Innovation Australia using the nursery R&D levy and funds from the Australian Government.

For information on how to get involved, go to <http://nurseryproductionfms.com.au> or contact NGIA on 02 8861 5100 or info@ngia.com.au

****ENDS****

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