



Nursery & Garden Industry  
Australia

## FEATURE

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### **Project plants the seeds with global researchers to grow Australia's nursery industry**

The nursery industry is looking beyond Australian borders to unearth new research synergies and identify potential collaborations that will further support the growth of its 1,777 production nurseries.

Known as the *Global Review and Gap Analysis of Nursery R&D Initiatives* (NY17007), the project is funded by Hort Innovation using nursery levies and funds from the Australian Government. The review is being delivered by Dr Kristen Stirling, Dr Doris Blaesing and Hugh Wardle from RM Consulting Group (RMCG).



RMCG Senior Consultant, Dr Kristen Stirling, oversees the project and, with the team, has spent the past five months putting Australian nursery R&D under the microscope to ensure levy investments are meeting the current and future research needs of industry.

A key part of the project is comparing Australian R&D to similar programs happening around the world. Dr Stirling believes that Australia is punching well above its weight, but collaboration with global research providers could take it to the next level.

"The Netherlands is home to one of the world's leading horticultural universities, Wageningen, which has extensive capabilities, experience and facilities to conduct innovative R&D for the nursery industry," Dr Stirling said.

"Current priority research areas at Wageningen include the reuse and recycling of water, energy and climate management, as well as next generation sequencing for biosecurity screening, all of which are incredibly relevant to growers here.

"Wageningen's name keeps popping up in Australia. The institution recently collaborated with Western Sydney University on a state-of-the-art vegetable glasshouse, and provided input into the University of Tasmania's Hort Masterclass."

Hort Innovation funds leading R&D on behalf of Australia's horticultural sector, investing \$2.26 million into R&D for the nursery industry in 2017-18 on areas such as biosecurity preparedness, career development and green infrastructure.

Dr Stirling looked at its counterpart in the UK, AHDB Horticulture, which is investing in similar areas and, more recently, the use of robotics to help address workforce challenges such as staff attraction and retention.

"AHDB has a program called Smart Hort which is aimed at reducing reliance on humans to grow production horticulture. This is particularly pertinent for their industry, as Brexit continues to play out and access to labour becomes harder," she said.



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“For instance, a robotic project is underway to benefit small to medium scale businesses, aimed at automating repetitive tasks such as taking and inserting cuttings, grading and collating plant specimens, as well as minimising plant damage”.

This technology could be a game-changer for Australia's nursery industry, which also faces challenges around access to labour, particularly as demand for green life increases, and people are moving away from agricultural jobs.

Dr Stirling said that when she approached Wageningen and AHDB, they were enthusiastic about the prospect of collaborating with Australian R&D providers for the betterment of nursery growers worldwide.

“The nursery industry is dynamic but highly diverse. As we're dealing with many different products and markets, it's important to note that research isn't a one-size-fits-all, but a vehicle to find new solutions for the benefit of people and plants.”

The project has completed an initial desktop review to assess research investments happening domestically and internationally. RMCG has also undertaken stakeholder consultations with R&D providers and industry.

The review and findings are now being analysed for RMCG to develop a roadmap to guide potential research opportunities and collaborations for Australia's nursery industry. It will be available early 2019.

\*\*\*\*ENDS\*\*\*\*

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**Caption:** Dr Kristen Stirling, RMCG Senior Consultant.

**Hort  
Innovation**  
Strategic levy investment

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FUND**

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