

The Rural Women's Award is conducted by the Australian Government's Rural Institute of Research and Development Corporation. It is open to all women involved in agriculture, horticulture and related service industries. The aim of the Award is to support women with a strong and positive vision for the future of their industry, sustainable agriculture and the role of rural women.

For the State Award there are three rounds of judging, based on a rather substantial written proposal demonstrating how the \$10,000 bursary prize would be spent, with a focus on potential to provide leadership and impart skills and knowledge.

I am a Bachelor of Business with a passion for gardening and design. My husband Stuart, a horticulturist, and I grew up in the Hills District of Sydney surrounded by bushland, nurseries and market gardens. In 1989 we moved to the NSW North Coast to pursue our dream of owning our own nursery.

Having soon discovered that our property was subject to frost we had put our nursery dream on hold, instead operating a landscape business for 8 years. At the age of 40, after 14 years of owner building, landscaping and planting, and with three teenage children, we decided to sell up our 9 acre property and buy a farm suitable for setting up our own wholesale production nursery.....Perhaps we were having a midlife crisis – as not many people decide to upsize at the age of 40.

For two years I scoured the region with a topographical map looking for the proverbial hen's tooth – a frost-free, elevated property with a warm northerly aspect, at least ten acres of level land and an abundant water supply. And, as water licenses were no longer being issued, the water supply had to be accompanied by a substantial existing irrigation license.

Eventually I came across an avocado farm on the internet which sounded promising, but had a hard job convincing the real estate agent to take us there. He was quite unwilling, citing a strange timber house and a lack of water, but I persisted, given the farm was advertised with 32 megalitre irrigation license and that there was a lake marked within the boundaries of that property on my map. When we got there I could understand his reluctance. The place resembled a tip and was so overgrown that neither the agent nor the elderly widow owner could tell us where the boundaries were.

Stuart and I were obviously up for a challenge. Unfortunately our three kids didn't share our vision and were horrified by our new abode - a run down shack dating back to the great depression which was engulfed like *The Sleeping Beauty* in gloomy vegetation. The previous owner's dog breeding interests were evidenced by well chewed architraves— indeed a mummified dog was later extracted from under the floorboards. All manner of wildlife inhabited the asbestos roof cavity and python skins hung like streamers from the roof rafters. While my kids lamented the loss of their swimming pool, for me the house was a terrible compromise on my own long held dream of *Country Style* living in a fine old Australian homestead on a hill with a mountain view.

We set about removing 20 tons of rubbish, 7 car bodies and a decade's worth of rampant weed growth while a team of four bulldozers worked for ten days to remove banana grass, lantana and hundreds of diseased avocado trees.

We were totally gob smacked to discover that once the detritus was removed, our house was actually perched on a hilltop vantage point with breathtaking views across our own crater-like lake to Minyon Falls and the Nightcap Range beyond.

Inspired, but not in a position to borrow large amounts of money, we drafted our own council plans based on my design, and with Stuart's talent for building and our perseverance, we set about self-building the homestead of my dreams using as much recycled material as possible. We lived under tarps while we reroofed, restumped and rebuilt the house on weekends doing all the work ourselves.

Stuart continued to work off-farm through the week, project managing the construction of a large nursery nearby for a Sydney-based company, while I maintained the farm and renovated.

As month after month rolled by, the enormity of what we'd taken on really hit us hard and we became emotionally and physically spent from working long hours, seven days a week. Then a massive hailstorm ruined our bumper avocado crop.

When the opportunity arose to take on two large tree growing contracts, our accountant suggested I could 'grow the weeds' while Stuart took on another two year project manager's position off-farm.

Being conservative about our debt levels, we put the remainder of our house construction on hold and channeled what was left of our borrowed funds into the site earthworks for our production nursery. Then started the process of potting thousands of plants every weekend with all the family pitching in.

Being left to my own devices with our fledgling nursery five days a week for two years, was a very steep learning curve. I had to familiarize with plants and their botanical Latin names, as well as dealing with customer liaison, bookkeeping, stocktaking and quarterly Business Activity Statements. Then there were thousands of fledgling plants to be weeded, pruned and staked. I soon mastered driving the tractor, with either a front end loader or a slasher attached, sometimes almost bulldozing my way across steep paddocks to combat that ever encroaching weed growth which is the downside of a frost-free site! One close call, which saw me hurtling down a 45 degree slope when the tractor popped out of gear, brings to mind a favorite motto: If at first you don't succeed, then don't try sky diving! The plants had to be watered up to three times a day via a manual irrigation system – until the luxury of computerized irrigation could be installed. I was constantly wet, sunburned and muddy. I had to be treated for facial skin cancers, severe back pain and skin rashes. I started losing my hair.

Why is it that bills travel through the mail at twice the speed of cheques? Like many rural women I just pulled my belt in and did what I had to do to stay afloat. Every cent had to be channeled back into nursery infrastructure and there was nothing to spare for luxuries like holidays, nice shoes or guttering on the house. When we ran out of money to complete our recycling dam project I scoured the Government Grant site for hours until I found successful grant recipient for a similar commercial project – “effluent recycling on a pig farm”.

This precedent gave me the impetus to apply for a Community Water Grant. I was successful in receiving \$20,500 to complete the project. In the words of Thomas Edison; “Good fortune is what happens when opportunity meets with planning.”

With the end of Stuart’s off farm contract work fast approaching, I stumbled upon the idea of launching an Ebay Store to help finance some of the nurseries’ capital costs. Via my online store, Treasures Ink., I could source and sell antique prints and maps worldwide. The extra work could be done at night but most importantly, it gave me an interest and a break from some of the more mundane and laborious farm work. By the time Stuart was at home full time, my online store was posting a small profit, Bangalow Wholesale Nursery was up and running, and joy of joys, it was a happy day when we sent out our first semi trailer load of advanced trees bound for Melbourne.

At a time when most large wholesale production nurseries are either passed on from father to son or set up by well cashed up entrepreneurs from outside of the industry we had achieved the *almost* impossible by deriving all of our income from home based industry, most of it from primary production, in just two years from the beginning of nursery construction. We have achieved this using sustainable farming methods, controlling invasive weeds and improving biodiversity via plantings of native species. We have set aside over one third of our 14 hectare farm as a flora and fauna preserve, with a half hectare rainforest remnant of heritage significance at it’s centre including mature red cedar.

Having worked for some years in isolation, as I started to see some light at the end of the tunnel on our farm I felt a need to reconnect myself with the outside world. Seeking more contact with women, I timidly took myself along to the business women’s group which met for breakfast once a month in our local town of Bangalow. At that time the group comprised women from businesses in the main street of town. I became a regular and as the group started to grow I was invited to join the small volunteer team responsible for running the group. I encouraged women from rural enterprise and home based business to come along, seeing this as a positive means of bringing rural and town-based women together to share skills and business experience. Such is the popularity of the group that membership has grown to a data base excess of 150 members.

When women began traveling from an hour or more away, rather than growing to an unsustainable size or turning women away, our organizing team encouraged other satellite groups to set up, offering to mentor them using a similar model. The idea has spread and business women's groups now meet once a month in Bangalow, Lismore, Murwillumbah, Mullumbimby, Tweed/Banora and Kirra.

Drawing on our own membership for guest speakers each month, we have always been delighted by the breadth of knowledge and unique experience that each woman has to offer. As well as sharing skills and information this has been a great confidence builder for the women involved, not the least for me, as my involvement in the group has honed my own confidence in public speaking and led to my involvement in the Rural Women's Award.

My RWA bursary has enabled me to take advantage of the kind of networking and educational opportunities for my chosen field - the nursery industry - I might otherwise have only dreamed about.

As part of my bursary project I attended the National Nursery and Garden Industry Assoc. Conference in Adelaide in March, with the theme "Sea change for an Essential Industry". The message I have taken away from this Conference is that the nursery and garden industry is playing an essential role in providing solutions for some of the most difficult challenges facing society today; carbon emissions, the obesity epidemic, biosecurity and quality of life for an aging population. Our industry has been wrongly portrayed as "the bad guy" when it comes to climate change, especially with regard to water use. People have stopped gardening in times of drought when, in fact, composting, recycling and sensible water practices can keep most gardens alive through extended dry spells.

Collectively, all of us, as home gardeners are custodians of the majority of Australia's urban parkland. When driving through some of Sydney's oldest and most prestigious Northern suburbs recently I was reminded that it is in fact the beauty of the trees there, in both the gardens and the street plantings that sets these suburbs apart. Sadly, gardening trends have turned away from planting trees

(often seen as being messy,) when, in fact, shade from trees to roofs and/or windows will reduce indoor temperatures by 6–12°C* in summer.

It is my hope that consumers will again return planting trees, not only for the health of the natural environment but for their own wellbeing. A single 8m tree strategically grown near a house to maximize wind breaking and shading effects can reduce annual heating and cooling costs by as much as 12%* as well as providing much needed habitat for native fauna.

Our nursery business focuses on trialing new selections of small to medium Australian rainforest and coastal tolerant trees for the landscape and development market. Rainforest trees had been overlooked by amenity horticulture in favor of imported exotic trees until recent years, as it was wrongly assumed that they would all require tropical conditions and vast amounts of water to thrive. However many Australian rainforest trees are endemic to frosty creek banks and higher altitude mountain areas and can be grown successfully as far south as Adelaide and Melbourne. Some are highly coastal tolerant, being adapted to sandy soils close to our vast coastline. Many species are smaller trees of 12m maximum height or less. Most importantly, many Rainforest species are quite beautiful, with lush, glossy foliage and new leaf growth which flushes with colours varying from lime green, to apricot, to bright red and deep purple. In recent coastal development there has been an awakening of the desirability of native trees and an environmental awareness leading to a demand by Councils and Landscape Architects.

Our Australian trees are suitable for street plantings, car parks and smaller urban backyards. Several of our tree selections are currently under consideration for PBR (that's Plant Breeders Rights – a type of plant patent) with hopes for future export potential. Part of my bursary will be utilized to cover the cost of these patent applications.

Even those who don't have space for a tree in their own garden can think outside the square and co-ordinate neighborhood street tree plantings to beautify cool and purify their suburb. Street and park trees in urban areas reduce winter wind speeds and can reduce heating costs by as much as 30%*.

(*Source NGIV website)

My vision for our most built up urban areas would be to see power lines placed underground and unsightly power poles replaced by street trees.

All plants, large and small have the ability to cleanse the air we breathe and even pot plants can play a role in improving air quality. When he worked on a lunar habitat for NASA, Bill Wolverton discovered plants were the best filters of ammonia, formaldehyde and other toxins released by furniture, carpets and even photocopiers. In his book, "How to grow Fresh Air" he rates 50 house plants for their effectiveness in removing common pollutants.

So, given all the talk about greenhouse gases and global warming, the most fundamental thing a person can do to improve air quality is put a plant into the ground.

Woman, traditionally the buyers of plants in our society, can have a powerful effect on reducing energy consumption, storing carbon and reducing pollution by improving their gardens. Planting and maintaining trees and green life can reduce energy use, sequester carbon, remove air born emissions from power stations and provide habitat for native birds and wildlife. In doing so, we can contribute not only to the wellbeing of our planet but our own good health, by enjoying healthy outdoor physical activity.

The balance of my bursary funds will be utilised later this year when I embark on a study tour of major Victorian production nurseries to look at sustainable growing methods, water treatment options, and potential to expand our customer base. I hope to share the knowledge gained from this study tour with other members of my industry through my membership of the NSW Nursery Industry Association.

In addition to the bursary prize I have won a one week Australian Institute of Company Director's Diploma Course to be held in Canberra with the other state winners later this month.

The National Rural Women's Award will be announced at a Gala Dinner at Parliament House, Canberra on May 27. The National winner receives further funding to enable future public speaking and travel opportunities.

I am available to mentor women who are interested in starting a business women's group in their region or who might like to enter the Rural Women's Award in future?

Tracey Knowland

Winner 2008 RIRDC Rural Women's Award NSW.

bangalownursery@linknet.com.au