

Planning for the future

Grower and Managing Director of Harts Nursery, Kerrie Hart, discusses the ups and downs of future-proofing his family business with development of a new site in the Gold Coast hinterland. He spoke to Jennifer Stackhouse.

Harts Nursery began life in the Brisbane suburb of Sunnybank in Queensland then moved to Rochedale in 1973. In 2004 the Hart family realised that Rochedale had shaken off its rural roots and was earmarked to become a satellite city. They decided it was time to relocate their business.

Kerrie, wife Denise and sons Jonathan and Chris all work in the business as do their wives. Jonathan and Chris are the fourth generation to be involved in the business, which was started in the early 1950s by Kerrie's grandfather Edwin Hart and then later run by his parents Frank and Margaret Hart.

The nursery specialises in foliage plants for both indoors and outdoors and also grows new exotic outdoor shrubs under licensing agreements with both local and overseas nurseries.

"We produce approximately 600,000 pots per year as well as 250,000 plugs for sale," says Kerrie. "We also produce approximately 400,000 plugs internally for our own production in our new propagation building."

Crotons are a speciality and another 10 brand new varieties are to be added to the existing list of 36 within the next 18 months. Other specialities are zygocactus (20 new varieties this year),



The Hart family are all involved in the business (left to right) Jonathan, Christopher, Denise and Kerrie.

hibiscus and spathiphyllum. A highlight next year is the re-introduction of the much-sought-after dragon tree dracaena range from Holland.

New site, new plans

Kerrie says that the chance to relocate was also a chance to diversify and to invest in the latest equipment and technology. The gently rolling 30-hectare green field site they found in the Gold Coast hinterland at Guanaba has also allowed

them to plan an efficiently laid out nursery.

The new site was purchased in 2008 and consultations began with town planner Jake Storey (Storey and Castle Planning Pty Ltd) and Brad Comley (Biome) on the huge task of designing the new site. Construction began in October 2012 with the setting out of new growing areas including a 2700-square-metre covered growing area.

The site works were mammoth and involved moving 25,000 cubic metres of soil, all of which was used on site for levelling purposes. "In the process we needed to remove 32 trees and the council requested that they be replanted with 1500," says Kerrie.

In the four years between buying the site and starting earthworks, Kerrie and Denise had spent time travelling in Europe looking at growing systems.

"Our main objective was to future-proof the nursery," Kerrie explains. "Power was brought into the site and Energex installed a new transformer inside the property to allow for a consistent three-phase power supply throughout the nursery. We have also installed a new automatic CAT generator to cover any unforeseen outages, which may occur.

"We have streamlined our production with two potting machines. We mix all of our own bark base mixes in-house and have installed two



cement mixer drums to accomplish this.”

Potting mix is carried by conveyor belt into the potting shed and then into the potting machines, says Kerrie. “We hold approximately 250 cubic metres of bark mix at any one time. We also purchased an Ellegaard plug machine to produce our own plugs for propagation and a full steaming cabinet to sanitise our pots and mixes.

“A significant change at the new site was to grow all plant lines (except propagation) on the ground so we could utilise the Dutch-made Prins spacing fork truck to bed the pots down. This has been a huge labour-saving device.”

Kerrie’s son Jonathan decided to put all watering lines underground negating the constant need to clean or repair blocked sprinklers.

Stumbling blocks

Although the first stage of construction went smoothly and is up and running, implementing further work has been beset with delays and red tape. The main problem has been a change of council laws in 2016 since the original plans were approved. Kerrie is concerned that council red tape may cause him to lose valuable export trade business to China and is also penalising his 10 full- and part-time staff members as one of the delayed building projects is the staff toilet block.



The new site has been designed for the future with state-of-the-art buildings and infrastructure.

Technology and construction

Graham Greig from Triad Computer Services handles IT for Harts including all computers, the phone system, security cameras and fibre optics. Graham was engaged in the project from the beginning to ensure designs and layouts met specific tailored requirements.

“We invested in fibre optics throughout the nursery to eliminate the chance of lightning strikes and to enhance the speed and quality of services,” says Kerrie. “Richard Cooke from Connect Power and Cabling has installed all electrical services with the Clipsal agricultural C-Bus system handling all aspects of the automation for the entire nursery (including lighting, venting on every building, all watering systems, pumping systems and security cameras).

“The C-Bus system is web based which allows us to access all systems anywhere in the world via smartphone or Internet access. We looked into many other systems on the market but found this to be the most flexible technology, which allows for our personal input in the design work.

He approached Warwick Fletcher from GreenLife Structures in Ballina NSW to build the nursery from the first greenlife structure through to the last, which is still to be started.

“He has built a state-of-the-art propagation building, which is fully environmentally controlled. It features wet walls, extractor fans, roller benching, fogging system which caters for three types of fog in the one building, heating system, two automatic removable roofs (internal layer and external layer), which controls the light within the building. Covered areas all have solar weave covers and our shadehouse uses memory retention hail netting with varying degrees of shade.”

Water sources and recycling

An important aspect of future-proofing a water-dependent business such as a wholesale nursery is water. The site has two creeks but irrigation

water is supplied from a large dam, which Kerrie explains has been engineered to hold a 12-month supply and covers 0.8ha.

“Water is harvested from runoff during rain and we have bore water as a back up,” says Kerrie. “Runoff from the buildings is channelled into a silt dam that can be used for recycling if needed.

We use Nelson water-efficient sprinklers in all growing areas and are still coming to terms with the water saving we are achieving using approximately 15–20 per cent less water than was used at Rochedale.

“We feel this is due to a combination of growing on the ground, the type of sprinklers and the different weather patterns in the Gold Coast hinterland,” he adds.



The Prins Fork is used to space pots and has meant huge savings in labour.

More information

Harts Nursery is a member of the Nursery and Garden Industry Queensland and a founding member of the tropical and ornamental plant supply group T.O.P.S. For more see www.hartsnursery.com.au.