



Nursery & Garden Industry  
Australia

## Case Study

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12 February 2018

### Tasmanian nurseries showcase diversity at national conference

Third generation nursery grower Mark Van der Staay is looking forward to demonstrating the diversity and innovation of the Tasmanian industry to 250 delegates arriving in Hobart this month, for the Nursery & Garden Industry of Australia (NGIA) biennial conference.

Mark's family business, Westland Nurseries at Seven Mile Beach south of Hobart, has been operating for more than 60 years and is one of the nurseries to be showcased on a delegates tour prior to the conference.

As the President of the Nursery & Garden Industry of Tasmania (NGIT), Mark has a clear idea of the challenges facing local nurseries, and the positives of doing business on the island.

"We have a very unique industry in Tasmania, a very 'clean' industry as far as pests and diseases go, thanks to Bass Strait. It's also a captive market as far as population, but that means we have to diversify to supply a range of different customers," Mark said.

"It can be a challenging place to do business – we have to be open-minded and think outside the box to seize opportunities, rather than specialising like the tubestock producers on the mainland, for example."

One opportunity to diversify came from local vignerons, who asked Westland Nurseries to pre-callus grape cuttings, a process that encourages white tissue to form at the cut parts of the vine to ensure quicker root development.

"We plant the grape cuttings in sand and put them on a hot bed to encourage the roots to develop, prior to planting back in the vineyard," Mark explained.

"We've now gone to the next stage of putting the grape cuttings into pre-former starter plugs, so that the growers have a whole cutting ready to plant."

Westland Nurseries propagate about 60 per cent of their own stock, supplying 14cm and 20cm wholesale plants and advanced trees up to 45L bags to seven Bunnings stores in Tasmania as well as Woolworths, Coles and independent garden centres.





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It's a far cry from 1956, when Mark's grandfather Henry Van der Staay started a nursery in Lenah valley, at the base of Mt Wellington. In the mid 1980s, the family moved the nursery to a larger site on a former pine plantation at Seven Mile Beach.

"We built a 4000 square metre, fully automated Dutch glasshouse designed for indoor plants. It has temperature, light and humidity controls and we also run ebb and flow benching, where water is pumped from under the floor to suit plants that don't like overhead watering, like poinsettias and cyclamens," Mark said.

"The automation is an absolute game changer – I now have the ability to control my irrigation system on my phone and it can measure the volume of water that's being used, as well as sense which solenoids use what quantity of water, so I can turn on multiple stations at once.



"We have an automated potting bench and the forklift can pick up 120 pots at a time."

The Van der Staays find it important to monitor garden trends in Europe and travel often to seek out new ideas, as well as nurturing close relationships with local plant breeders and marketers to expand their range.

"I spent three months in Holland learning about cut flower production and I've been to the United States, New Zealand and around

Australia. It is important in our game to always try and pick up new ideas or products to improve what we're doing and it keeps us motivated," Mark said.

He wasn't initially interested in nursery work. After finishing school he worked in hospitality and business, and then started working casually at Westland. His father suggested Mark may as well complete his Certificates I to IV in nursery production, and he found his niche.

"The human resources side is challenging with such a large workforce but I enjoy growing plants and also growing the business," he said.

"One of the big themes on the NGIA conference tour is family businesses and we have second and third generations of nursery growers in Tasmania, so we're looking forward to showing the innovation and diversity that we've achieved in a small market."

Westland is the final stop on the pre-conference tour of wholesale nurseries which includes third-generation Tibball's Nursery and Granton Plants. The retail tour includes visits to Willie Smith's Apple Shed which has been in the family for four generations, and long time family business, Chandlers Nursery.

"With new generations coming through we wanted the theme for the conference to be change and modernisation," Mark said.



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“Tasmania is a unique place and that’s a drawcard in itself, but the value in the conference also lies in bouncing ideas off like-minded people – it’s one of the few times we get everyone together in the same spot!”

## **ENDS.**

Nursery R&D and marketing levy highlights at the NGIA National Conference in Hobart on February 19-21 include:

- 2020 Vision and Plant Life Balance
- Hort Masterclass Workshop
- Results of the Tree Standard Research
- Nursery Industry Biosecurity Program
- Diagnosing Plant Diseases
- Nursery Research, Statistics & Data Tool

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### ***Photo Captions (click on images for high res versions)***

Image 1 (top right) Mark Van der Staay at Westland Nurseries, Tasmania. Image 2 (lower left) Little helper: Westland Nurseries, Tasmania.

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