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Hort Masterclass put more 'tools in the toolbox' for Cameron's Nursery

Engaging in learning and professional development opportunities is critical to drive positive, sustainable business outcomes.

That's the philosophy of Sonja Cameron, Director of Cameron's Nursery, a specialist wholesale nursery based in Arcadia, New South Wales, on the outskirts of Sydney. Cameron's Nursery focuses on growing quality plants sustainably, receiving many awards for environmental practices and having gained best practice biosecurity NIASA and EcoHort accreditation.

In 2017, Sonja received one of three nursery industry scholarships to participate in the University of Tasmania's inaugural Masterclass in Horticultural Business course. Today, she sits on the steering committee to help further engage industry and promote the value of the course. Prolonged health concerns and a need to pivot the business led Sonja to apply for a Masterclass in Horticultural Business scholarship.

"We needed to refocus the direction of the business at the time, and this course equipped us with information to be more confident in decision making and to better analyse complex issues that were facing us," Sonja said.

"At the end of the course, I had developed a highly detailed and tailored business plan that covered the entirety of our business, giving us a clear roadmap to achieving our goals.

"In fact, we are currently in the last six months of the business plan established through the Masterclass. Implementing this plan over the past four years has involved big investment, growth, and development, but we stuck to it and have completed around 80 per cent of the plan we developed in 2017.

"The plan has led to infrastructure builds, an overhaul in potting and production, expansion of growing areas and

more. The Masterclass gave us the practical skills to make it all happen.

"A big part of the growth of our business was our staff. Retaining and developing our staff continues to be a top priority, and the human resource aspects of the course helped us further develop our workplace environment to ensure that we were making good decisions for our staff, equipping them with the latest information, providing opportunities for growth, and fostering an inclusive, diverse workplace culture."

Sonja said that having the skills and knowledge to be able to readily adapt and respond to issues is a key benefit from participating in education courses and degrees. "Since completing the Masterclass, I have done an associate degree in Applied Business and am currently doing my Masters of Business. By continuing to add more tools to my toolbox, I've been better equipped to respond readily and effectively to events and issues," she said.

"Using the skills and knowledge we've learnt; we have been able to create a disaster and emergency management plan. This helped us respond to unexpected events, like COVID-19 and the awful hailstorms in 2020, because we had the high-level response plan and contingencies in place.

"Following the hailstorms, we knew we needed a plan, so we had to quickly dust ourselves off and refer back to our disaster plan. Nothing is going to be perfect when it comes to surprise events like that, but it helped us mitigate risk to the business, our staff, and provided a solid place to start."

The Hort Masterclass brings together students within the nursery industry and the broader horticultural sector, working to find solutions to shared challenges, it also offers students farm walks and site visits.

"Having the opportunity to network with likeminded agribusiness professionals across different industries, I



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discovered that we all have similarities and share common challenges. You're forced to look outside your own industry for solutions and innovations.

"The optional farm walks were particularly useful. We were able to share information and see firsthand how people were solving these shared challenges. Off the back of one of these walks at a hop farm for example, we got a great idea for how to implement footbaths.

"The lectures and course materials have strong focus on you and your business, tailoring your learning and key outcomes to what you're hoping to achieve. And you don't have to be a business owner to participate and get value from this course, I've seen several people from my cohort get nice pay rises, promotion to another level, or take that leap into management off the back of it. You just need to have a clear goal or a need to adapt the business."

Now named the [Graduate Diploma in Agribusiness: Masterclass in Horticultural Business](#), the course seeks to equip current and future farm managers, owners and employers with the agribusiness skills and capabilities required to run profitable and sustainable farm businesses.

The Hort Masterclass offers a flexible online structure, covering several key modules such as financial management and law, supply chain management and logistics, people and culture, and business development and strategy. For the first time, this course will offer greater flexibility giving participants the option to undertake the course over an 18-month period.

"Knowledge is so important as it helps us to make better decisions. The Masterclass has made me a better leader and more strategic in my thought patterns.

"Our industry often underestimates our skills, knowledge and abilities. We are constantly adapting and innovating to ensure the future sustainability of our industry. Courses like the Masterclass just help to give you options, confidence in your decision making, and the tools to establish a pathway to achieving your goals.

"If you're an employee who's interested, I'd recommend you sit down with your employer to get their support and buy in and work together on establishing what your project is and what the outcomes will be.

"Scholarships will likely be offered for the 2022 intake, and I encourage all nursery participants to consider applying. "There are also several government subsidies and grants available which can help break down the monetary barriers to applying. Investment in the Masterclass is an investment in not just your business but yourself. It's worth every cent.

"Finally, think about your business plan before you start and what you want to achieve through the Masterclass. This will give such meaning to the ending of the program, and what you take away from the course," Sonja said.

Upon successful completion of the course, students graduate from the University of Tasmania with a **Graduate Diploma in Agribusiness** and are invited to attend a graduation ceremony.

Applications are now open! An information session is being held Tuesday 30 November at 7pm. To register visit [Masterclass Information Session | Tasmanian Institute of Agriculture \(utas.edu.au\)](#)

For more information on the program, scholarships, and to apply, head to: utas.edu.au/tia/study/masterclass-in-horticultural-business.

The Hort Masterclass is part of the Hort Frontiers Leadership Fund, a Hort Innovation strategic partnership initiative that uses a combination of government and partner funding to address major issues facing the future of Australian horticulture for the benefit of the entire industry.

