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Thursday, 2 September 2021

Best management practice helps Spring Creek seedling achieve its sustainability goals

To ensure continued business viability, implementing environmentally sustainable and high plant health practices should be top of mind for nursery growers as we continue to face varying climate pressures..

That's according to Peter Burnell, owner of Spring Creek Seedlings, who along with wife Lesley run a 100-acre vegetable and strawberry seedling production nursery in Stanthorpe, Queensland.

A first-generation nursery grower, Peter has allocated significant resources into investigating in ways to enhance production capacity by improving water use and energy cost efficiencies.

"Ensuring the business is continually innovating and implementing best management environmental practices is a top priority for our business and our staff," Peter said.

"We're increasingly seeing the impacts of a changing climate on the land, and the stresses that places on businesses in return.

"Prolonged droughts and periods of dry has shown how important it is to maximise water use efficiencies across the business. For us, we noticed that during the drought the salt levels in the soil was increasing significantly.

"It became clear that the long-term viability of our business was going to become increasingly reliant on our ability to capture and re-treat water, so we made a number of changes like implementing new filtration systems that would help improve water quality."

Central to the success of these improvements was the business' commitment to best management practice, environmental and natural resource stewardship, which led to them achieving Nursery Industry Accreditation Scheme Australia (NIASA) and EcoHort accreditation.

This commitment to industry best-practice was formalised in 2011 and the business has maintained accreditation by undergoing an independent audit on an annual basis to ensure their business is operating under the national set of guidelines. The guidelines, which are available to all production nurseries, cover best management practice crop hygiene, crop management, site management and water management.

"Committing to NIASA and EcoHort certifications has been critical for us and has given us peace of mind and confidence in the ongoing success of the business," Peter said.

"Following best practice across irrigation and energy use not only provides cost savings to us – it puts us at a significant market advantage.

"NIASA certification has given us confidence in the technologies that we invest in. For example, we recently installed an ozone system to cut down on chlorine use at one of our facilities, which is a NIASA approved method.

"Becoming EcoHort certified has helped us ensure our nursery operated according to best practice environmental outcomes. It has put us in a position where we could reuse water and treat it to a high standard so it could be sent straight back into the nursery. During dry times we couldn't get any additional water, so we had to make sure every drop was being utilised.

"We are now working on a project making the entire nursery concrete. This will help us to better capture water that hasn't yet been contaminated by the ground, meaning there's a higher quality and quantity of water that we can reclaim, re-treat and reuse. The working environment also becomes safer, more hygienic and helps machinery operate better which boosts efficiencies and productivity levels."

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This project has been funded by Hort Innovation using the nursery research and development levy and funds from the Australian Government. For more information on the fund and strategic levy investment visit horticulture.com.au



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As major strawberry plug plant suppliers, Spring Creek Seedling's NIASA processes and procedures are also helping meet standards for the Australian Strawberry Runner Accreditation Scheme (ASRAS).

"There has been quite a lot of growth within Australia's strawberry plug industry, which is now a major part of our business. We passed our initial audit under the ASRAS which has been critical for the growth of our business and has helped set a standard for the framework which is being developed," Peter said.

To cut down energy costs, the business also just installed solar into a reverse osmosis unit that offsets daily usage and electricity costs and can retreat the same amount of water just during daylight hours.

"By improving water use and energy efficiencies across the business we have been able to cut costs by a third," he said.

"Though the improvements we have made across the business are costly, we are reaping the benefits from our various investments in infrastructure and filtration systems. In the next couple of years, we hope to be generating all our own power and making sure 100% of the water in the nursery is being filtered, sanitised and stored.

"We always want to make sure that we aren't having detrimental impacts on our local environment and take steps to help improve conditions and minimise erosion.

"Our advice is that best practice needs to be ingrained in the day-to-day running of your business, and it's important that you keep your staff involved in the auditing process and collaboratively work to continually make improvements.

"By putting an emphasis on continued growth and best management practice, we can continue to bolster the sustainability of our operation and long-term viability even in during times of tough climatic conditions. It also gives us piece of mind that we're doing the right thing by the land and environment in which we operate."

The NIASA program underpins the Australian Plant Production Standard managed by Greenlife Industry Australia, which is a holistic system designed to ensure a sustainable future for the nursery industry. Critically, it's driven by what the market expects of a quality product.

Any business that is looking to explore NIASA certification is encouraged to visit <https://nurseryproductionfms.com.au/> to find out more about the program as well as the other nursery certification programs such as EcoHort and BioSecure HACCP.

For more information, please contact Greenlife Industry Australia at: info@greenlifeindustry.com.au or on 02 8861 5100.



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