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Non-ornamentals, the forgotten members of our industry!

So you think our industry is all about the plants and the people who sell them? But have you ever stopped to think about the many products and services that are used in the process of growing and selling plants? Or about the many businesses that provide them? In this nursery paper, Sandy Pate, Industry Development Officer for Western Australia, looks at our allied trade sector and the vital role they play in supporting a thriving and sustainable nursery and garden industry.



Non-ornamentals, the forgotten members of our industry!

The non-ornamental sector of our industry, also known as allied traders, provide the vital ingredients which allow both of the other sectors to operate. They are the quiet achievers and frequently unsung heroes – the forgotten members!

A three-pronged industry

The two biggest groups are the retail sector and production nurseries.

Retail sector

Our retail sector tends to be the front-runner as the glamour face of our industry due to the marketing and promotional spend invested to attract consumers, such as through glossy magazines and television advertising along with a host of other mediums. They also interface directly with the public on a day to day basis.

Production nurseries

The size of production nurseries can often be spectacular. They also maintain a presence in the public eye, whether

it's through the logos emblazoned on their trucks travelling along busy roads, the labels on their plants or by their own promotional advertisements in the press.

Although not usually selling direct to the public, they supply all manner of popular plants in a range of sizes. They also strive to provide new plant selections and variations. One recent trend is growing advanced trees, some of which can be huge. No longer do we plant an acorn and wait for a huge oak tree to grow. Patience is no longer a virtue when it comes to customers wanting an instant garden.



Products from the non-ornamental sector can cover anything from wheelbarrows through to mulch chemicals. However, this diversity makes the establishment of a single accreditation scheme problematic.

So who makes up the allied sector?

Both the retail sector and production nurseries are reliant on the non-ornamental sector of the industry. The following are some of the goods and services provided to our industry by allied traders:

- A wide range of media and mulches
- Pots and trays of all sizes and growing containers up to 2000 litres in capacity
- Fertilisers, plant care products and a huge range of other chemicals
- Greenhouses, growing structures and associated equipment
- Shade cloth, stakes and tools
- Specialised tractors, motorbikes, sprayers and other equipment
- Pot recycling and waste management
- Wrapping, cartons and labels
- Garden furniture, ornaments and water features
- Clothing, giftware and food
- Communications and publications
- Advisory support on all allied products.

Both of our icon magazines Australian Horticulture and Greenworld are allied traders, as is the marketing buying group Plants Plus, label manufacturers MacBird and Norwood, not to mention the huge range of promotional material, brochures and other magazines which enrich our industry and contribute to profitability.

Help from the non-ornamental sector can be as diverse as the quality earthenware pots used for presentation right through to the coloured paper and ribbon we sometimes used to wrap them. Most of these ingredients are humble but without them our ability to do the job would be limited.

Schools, universities, Tafes and other training establishments also come under the category of allied traders. Ongoing training of existing and new staff is vital for our businesses to meet existing and future needs.

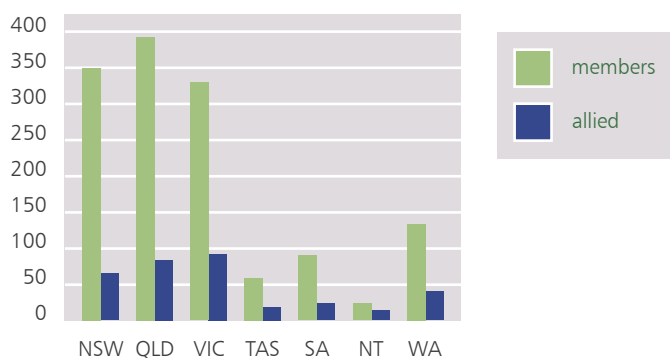


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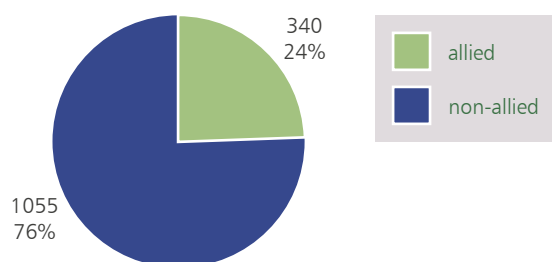
How important are they?

Strategically allied traders are very important to our industry and our associations.

Number of allied traders in proportion to members



Nationwide percentage of allied and non-allied members



In a retail garden centre, allied traders offer a range of add-on products and services that can make a point of difference when selling plants.

Moving with the times – allied traders take proactive stance

The allied sector's products and services have the ability to keep many nurseries in business. They make a major contribution to assisting with compliance issues and environmental regulations.

The irrigation industry, for example, is vital to our industry in these times of water restrictions and water reuse. At one of our national conferences some years ago one of the speakers said "the person who controls the irrigation controls the profit." In other words, it is the allied traders who supply the base ingredients for our industry and as such are at the forefront of changes impacting on our environment.

Changes to irrigation systems and equipment have been radical. New technology allows a nursery person, via mobile phone while overseas, to check the temperature in a greenhouse and open and close screens and vents. Automatic weather stations can be accessed remotely and irrigations systems altered and activated. Automation and robotics are becoming a reality for us.

New water absorbing chemicals have become available and are frequently incorporated into potting mixes and mulches. Mulches and mixes are more scientifically manufactured and better screened for improved water retention. Our industry will be required to make many more changes and I have no doubt that allied traders will be at the forefront of these.

The environment has become a key consideration in policy settings at the local, national and international level. More and more public and private companies have embraced the environment in their corporate objectives in response to a growing public awareness and concern. In addition, the exchange of goods and services is increasingly being conducted on the basis of some minimum standard. Allied traders have met the challenge by altering products such as potting mixes, media and mulches to meet needs in the area of health, environment, national standards and industry best practice through accreditation.



The allied sector product base continues to extend and develop.

Industry development

Production and retail sectors of our industry have their own industry development officers dedicated to working with them over many issues. While allied traders do not have their own development officers, they are supported to some degree by the development officers in each state.

At this stage there are no national accreditation schemes for the many allied traders such as there are already for production nurseries, retail garden centres and media suppliers.

The limitation to any efforts to set up such a scheme is the diversity of business types, which makes it practically unworkable. How do you come up with an equitable scheme to compare standards for label manufacturers, pot manufacturers or greenhouse equipment?

Despite this, allied traders continue to show leadership themselves, and invest in leadership and the adoption of best practice by the industry generally. Industry development activities such as training and field days have enjoyed the generous support of allied traders over the years and as an industry we all benefit from this investment. Where would a conference be without a trade display area, a trade day or the host of other events sponsored with allied trader support?

Support and recognition

Having spoken with allied traders about their 'forgotten member status' the consensus is they appreciate support from their fellow industry association members, such as by being given the opportunity to supply goods and services. They would also like to receive more recognition for their efforts in supporting the industry.

One form of recognition that we do provide in the Certified Nursery Professional scheme and I hope allied traders will take advantage of this means of appreciation and recognition.

Allied trader directory

Currently the NGIA Nursery Trade Register does include a product and services listing and sections two to seven of this are devoted to our allied trade members, making it easier to find their state listing. It has been suggested that in order to increase support and recognition a national allied trader directory could be created with listings by product rather than by state.

Some of the states with smaller populations have to purchase interstate if suitable product is not available locally, so such listings of allied traders are of particular assistance to them.



Media and mulches are being more scientifically manufactured and better screened for improved water retention.

Conclusion

Unfortunately, the allied trader members of our industry have been the 'forgotten members', or perhaps not so much 'forgotten' as at times taken for granted. While some of the items they provide are humble, such as a bamboo stake or tree guards, when one runs out of these items at a critical time it can be very inconvenient.

The time has come to remedy the situation. We can all provide allied trader members with our support, not only by purchasing from them but also by giving them recognition for the vital role that they play in our industry.

Non-ornamentals – the forgotten members of our industry? No longer, I hope.

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A shopper explores the growing range of products that the non-ornamental sector supplies to garden centres all over the country.

References

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