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The benefits of being professional – accreditation

Garden centres, production nurseries and growing media suppliers can all benefit from meeting a standard, being independently assessed, demonstrating professionalism, gaining promotional advantages and regularly getting help with business improvements. With this in mind, the nursery and garden industry carries out two accreditation programs, the Nursery Industry Accreditation Scheme, Australia (NIASA) and the Australian Garden Centre Accreditation Scheme (AGCAS). In addition, individuals who work in the nursery and garden industry can gain professional recognition through the Nursery & Garden Industry Professional Program (NGIPP). This *Nursery Paper* provides an outline of these accreditation and professional recognition schemes as well as detailing some of the benefits that businesses and individuals have already gained from them.

Is accreditation for your business?

The concept of professional independent assessment of businesses and business practices is not new and is one that is used in many industries. For example, plumbers, car repairers, accountants and doctors all have available to them schemes of best management practice that enable demonstration of their professionalism and provide a mechanism for learning and continual improvement.

Within the nursery and garden industry nationally, NIASA and AGCAS have already attracted 300 businesses to become accredited and benefit from the accreditation process. This number has steadily increased over the past few years.

While the technical focus of AGCAS and NIASA differ, the concept of a helpful independent assessment that encourages business improvement and a professional attitude is common to both. In addition, AGCAS and NIASA

provide industry benchmarks for professional standards.

Being accredited is not just about meeting externally and arbitrarily imposed criteria. It is about demonstrating to yourself, your staff, your customers and the industry that you are professional, are not afraid of independent assessment and have a positive attitude towards learning and business improvement. It is also industry recognition for using best management practices, which can result in greater business confidence and pride.

Do accredited businesses make more money?

In regard to the bottom line the answer is a definite yes. Independent Australia-wide research carried out by Financial Management Research Centre (FMRC), now known as CCH Benchmarking, showed that NIASA accredited production nurseries had higher gross profit margins, gross profit per person and net profit

per owner as well as lower throw-out rates. Also, some ACGAS business owners have reported increased patronage from more affluent customers and greater sales as a result of the ACGAS process.

Both ACGAS and NIASA provide a rigorous checklist of best management practices and a process that can lead to greater customer appeal and efficiency. It is these processes and practices that can result in greater profitability.

To help these schemes develop further and to add more value for participating businesses and individuals, they will be more widely promoted throughout the industry and to consumers. This will be achieved through the implementation of the industry's new strategic plan 'The Nursery and Garden Industry, 2002 and Beyond', which has accreditation and professional recognition as a major focus.

NIASA



Since 1994, over 200 production nurseries and growing media suppliers have become accredited under NIASA. These businesses are continually helped in their professional activities by an Australian wide network of nursery industry development officers (NIDOs).

In a recent survey of all NIASA businesses, participants claimed that NIASA has enabled them to maintain a high level of professionalism and a beneficial regular interaction with the NIDO. The survey results also indicated that the time is right for increased NIASA marketing to industry, greenlife buyers and to end consumers.



The major focus of NIASA is the best

management practice guidelines that were originally produced in 1994 and then updated and published in 1997. Over 3400 copies have already been sold. Recently updated again, and soon to be republished, these guidelines provide a template of best management practices for production nurseries and growing media suppliers. The guidelines were developed through extensive consultation with industry and are regularly reviewed by state and national NIASA committees.

The face of NIASA is usually the NIDO in each state. It is the role of the NIDO to offer helpful feedback and suggestions on business improvement options,



LEFT: Stuart Firth of Deandar Nursery, New South Wales, says, "NIASA means a better product, less maintenance and an improved production site."



RIGHT: Gary James of Benara, Western Australia, says, "NIASA helps to improve staff knowledge and skills and maintain a high level of professionalism." Photo shows Gavin James with nursery industry development officer Sandy Pate.



LEFT: Joe Perner of Cycad Gardens, in the Northern Territory, says, "I use NIASA to help set a personal benchmark of best practice and as a marketing tool, especially for export."

RIGHT: John Bunker, of Redlands Nursery in Queensland, says, "NIASA enables us to achieve and continually upgrade best management practice production methods for our operation. It also provides us with professional recognition from government authorities, including the EPA and shire council." Photo shows the 'catch can' method of evaluating irrigation efficiency.



as well as ensuring that standards are met. This is achieved via at least one onsite visit a year, phone contact, and by providing relevant follow up information.

The independent advice offered by the NIDO and the NIASA best management practices enable efficient production of healthy, vigorous plants and/or quality growing media, knowledgeable staff and informed management. NIASA also offers a new range of marketing and promotional material and initiatives.

For more information contact the NIDO at your state association office.

AGCAS

Since AGCAS got under way in 2000, almost 100 garden centres have achieved accreditation status. Similar to NIASA, AGCAS businesses are continually helped by a national network of professionals, the garden centre development officers (GCDOs).



AGCAS enables retail nurseries to benchmark performance and provide information and advice on how to build and enhance their reputation in the eyes of their customers. Designed as a marketing-based and customer-focused tool, the AGCAS process measures the way garden centres look after and relate to their customers and it also provides an understanding about what and how improvements can be made.

The GCDOs in each state can guide retail businesses seeking accreditation through the AGCAS process, which includes internal and external reviews, a customer survey and a written report of results. The **internal review**, usually carried out by the owner or manager, is designed to assess the garden centre in four main areas:

- Product quality.
- The garden centre itself (i.e. car park, facilities, and pathways).
- Knowledge, attitude and training of staff.
- Promotional activities and customer services.

The **external review**, conducted by the GCDOs, covers the same topics but places particular emphasis on the quality of green life, staff knowledge and safety at the centre.



George Young of Woodbine Gardens in Victoria says, "AGCAS has enabled us to identify and focus on a particular, more affluent type of customer. It also improved our management structure and level of service. All of this has led to greater profitability and accountable management."



Bob Moore of Premier Nurseries in New South Wales says, "As a result of accreditation, customer service has improved, our plants are presented better, displays are erected with a lot more thought, signage has improved and our staff are constantly seeking new ideas."



Anna Tyson of Nardoo Nursery in Queensland says, "We believe we have definitely increased our local clientele since accreditation and this is a very definite 'plus' for our nursery. In addition, staff morale has been lifted considerably and we all have more pride in our achievement."

The **customer survey** provides the business with valuable information on its customers, including demographics (where they live, their age and gardening profile) and their views on its products, staff and services.

Once the reviews and survey have been carried out, a **written report of results** is produced and the GCDO will work with the garden centre to suggest any appropriate business improvements.

AGCAS enables a retail garden centre to measure its performance against industry standards, understand what its customers want and how they feel about



Andrew Raper (left) of Rhodo Glen Nurseries in Victoria says, "I particularly like the aspect of having to keep up to date as you cannot expect to be professional by getting a certificate and then doing nothing else. Things change all the time."



Joanne Harris of Guildford Town Garden Centre, WA says, "Now we can let our customers know that our professionalism is recognised by the industry across the country. NGIPP builds confidence, not just in our customers but in the staff (pictured) who proudly wear the label."

the garden centre, its products and services. They can clearly identify where their competitive strengths lie and where improvements can be made. AGCAS also offers a range of marketing and promotional material and initiatives.

For more information about AGCAS contact the GCDO in your state.

NGIPP

Initiated in 2001, the Nursery & Garden Industry Professional Program (NGIPP) has already provided 100 experienced and qualified members of the nursery and garden industry with recognition for their professional status.



NGIPP encourages the industry and its customers to acknowledge the skills and experience necessary to run or work in a successful garden centre, production nursery or allied trade business. By promoting the required skills and experience,

NGIPP can raise the profitability of our industry by lifting the community expectations of the value for nursery and garden industry products and services.

NGIPP recognises that knowledge and relevant experience is important, and that this needs to be regularly supported by continual learning through experience, education and training. For a NGI Professional to remain in the program they need to show their commitment to keeping their skills current, for example, by attending seminars, workshops or training courses.

The program is being strongly supported by the industry, with many nurseries and garden centres indicating that they have a preference for their employees and prospective employees to have this status.

The requirements for participation and an application form are on the NGIA website: <www.ngia.com.au>.

The bottom line

These days, professionalism is probably the single most important ingredient in the recipe for success within the nursery and garden industry. Demonstrating our professionalism will enable our products and services to be more highly valued by our customers as well as by the community generally.

As a result, the Nursery & Garden Industry offers a selection of accreditation and professional recognition programs and is actively promoting them to the industry and the community. Are you demonstrating your professionalism?

Further information

For more information on any of these accreditation or professional recognition programs, please contact your state NGI office or go to the NGIA website: <www.ngia.com.au>.

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Nursery & Garden Industry Australia



Horticulture Australia