

New waxflowers' appeal brings new life to landscape

By John Fitzsimmons

Through astute acquisitions, and in response to business trading patterns, a business best known as a cut flower trade and export specialist is now building new opportunities in the nursery and landscape plant sectors.

Well established Perth-based company Wafex and its relatively new sister company – Melbourne-based Helix Australia, businesses operated by business partners Craig Musson and Adrian Parsons, are behind the developments.

Wafex is the leading exporter of cut flowers (fresh and dried) in Australia with warehouse, packing and coolroom facilities in both Melbourne and Perth. The company enjoys export markets in more than 16 countries and has a dedicated supplier base of more than 200 flower growers covering both east and west coasts of Australia. This is complemented by a cut flower import business. Together they employ about 50 people. This import-export balance accommodates currency exchange rate movements such as the currently strong A\$ which presents a price challenge for Australian exports.

"Australia – as a global supplier of native flowers – is struggling," Adrian

Parsons explained. "Our distance from market, exchange rate pressures and freight costs, are making it very difficult to export Australian natives. However one of the areas where we are maintaining our space is in new varieties."

"Waxflower (*Chamelaucium* spp) is our biggest export crop by far. There was a time when we always had a seasonal advantage, with Israel and California growing in the December-June window while Australia owned the June to December window, and we never had competition. That has now changed," he said.

Peru and South Africa have emerged as other southern hemisphere producers with lower production costs, lower freight costs to northern hemisphere markets, and tariff advantages that we don't have. They have "eaten into our competitiveness", Adrian commented.

"But new hybrids, new varieties, are maintaining a premium – particularly in Europe in Holland – so one of the motives in investing in new varieties has to be to

hang on to market share – to be leading the pack," he went on.

"The high Australian dollar has really decimated the export industry. Wafex is number one or two in that space but it is a very small space. We've hung on through the last five or six years despite the toll taken by drought and exchange rates. We've been able to hang on because we've had quite a strong domestic market, plus we've been involved in importing on the flip side of the exchange rate bogey. But new hybrids have enabled us to maintain export market share and get a price premium which we need. With our labour costs and our freight costs our production is quite expensive by the time it hits the world market."

"So the only way we hang in there is if it's a little bit special and the new waxflower varieties that Helix has acquired and continues to acquire are unusual and exhibit the sort of unusual colours, flower forms and flower timing that, particularly in Holland, they'll reward that."

The platform that Helix was established on was formed by the acquisition of a suite of varieties from noted WA breeder Brian Jack. The company continues to acquire new varieties from Brian and other breeders.

"Often Wafex will be dealing with a waxflower grower who – through breeding or through chance crossings sports will develop – we've bought new varieties that are early flowering or late flowering – something special to expand our range."

"The only way we can compete is to be at the forefront of new varieties."

Seeing an opportunity to become the world's leading source of new waxflower varieties, Adrian and Craig more recently established Helix Australia which is currently developing networks of licensed growers locally and overseas in both the cut flower and nursery industries.



Waxflower 'Dancing Queen' in pots



Wafex partner Craig Musson with 'Sarah's Delight' in the field

Helix Australia is a relatively new member of NGIV and among the licensed propagators of their new PBR waxflower lines are some notable industry participants including Greenhills Propagation Nursery in Victoria, Benara Nurseries in Western Australia and Native Plant Wholesalers in South Australia.

Helix Australia has identified the nursery and landscape industries as having been starved for new and improved waxflower hybrids and will invest over the coming years to raise the profile and application of this stunning and under-utilised Australian native genus.

Since its inception Helix has put together an exciting range of new waxflower varieties including 'My Sweet Sixteen', 'Dancing Queen', 'Chantilly Lace', 'Sarah's Delight', 'Moonlight Delight' and 'Raspberry Ripple'.

Adrian commented: "Waxflower is a very popular landscape plant but over the last 10 or 15 years it hasn't seen a lot in terms of new varieties. Long term standards include 'Purple Pride' (bred by George Lullfitz in the 1970s), 'Wanneroo', 'Lady Stephanie' and 'Mullering Brook'."

"Now we've come into that nursery space and got a very good response," Adrian said.

"The new varieties bring new forms including bigger flowers, bigger buds and new colours. 'Sweet Sixteen' for example is unusual because it's a bi-colour starting off white, then it turns red – so you've got a mix of red and white – then it finishes its flowering cycle all red, which is pretty amazing."

"Flowering times – early flowering, late flowering, but mainly new colours – that's where the existing native plant growers have gone, 'this needs a kick – excitement and innovation'.

"The drought period was a busy time for native plant sales and when Helix started we were still in drought so interest levels were still high. Hardy? Definitely tick that box. Low water needs? Definitely tick that box. It's seasonal colour with late winter to spring flowering."

"So, we have the two channels – selling into the cut flower market, producing cut flowers not just in Australia. Helix has agreements in place in South Africa and Israel and California to produce waxflower – either at different times of the year to Australia or for geographical reasons. That's one channel where Helix is putting its new varieties.

The other channel is obviously the nursery industry with tubegrowers and major nurseries. Helix is doing its own marketing – "laying the base, building relationships, getting into the new industry". For Adrian, who started in the industry 20 years ago at retail level, it is something of a return.

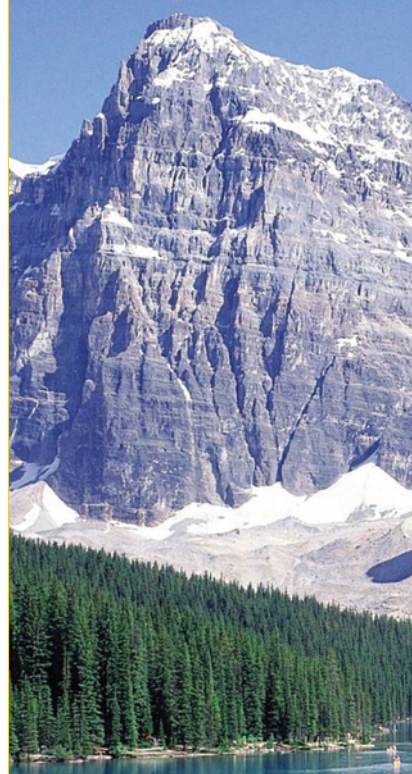
There are also developments beyond waxflowers. The company bought a flower farm in Victoria's Gippsland last year and in doing so inherited a RIRDC-funded *Leptospermum* breeding program run in conjunction with DPI Victoria.

"This is quite a nice tie-in with waxflower – it's a native, a 'filler' flower at cut flower level, and it has similar landscape applications."

(continued next page)



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(from previous page)

"At the tail end of the project they identified three standout cut flower varieties and three standout landscape varieties."

"The Leptospermum breeding program was started in 1995 and yet nothing had happened at commercialisation level with this amazing gene pool of varieties. So Wafex has come in, bought the flower farm, is getting the Leptospermum breeding blocks up to speed, and we're now starting to look at commercialisation opportunities which will be channelled through Helix."

"In taking on the farm Wafex is a partner with RIRDC and DPI Victoria, while they needed a commercialisation partner and Helix will play that role."

"So, Helix is waxflower and now Leptospermum and there's more than enough – in our current and future waxflower varieties plus all these Leptospermums – to keep us busy for quite a few years."

Some of the companies' new waxflowers include:

- **'Dancing Queen'** (PBR): A unique double waxflower variety featuring an abundance of blooms ranging from soft baby pink through to vibrant candy pink. During winter and spring these stunning blooms dance upon a backdrop of fresh, fine green foliage. A rounded shrub growing to approximately 2m H x 1.5m W.
- **'My Sweet Sixteen'** (PBR): From early spring, masses of pure white flowers open upon a backdrop of fresh, fine green foliage. These blooms mature to a rich red shade displaying an attractive bi-colour appearance of both white and red blooms and everything in between. A rounded shrub growing to approximately 2m H x 1.5m W.
- **'Chantilly Lace'** (PBR): Unique frilly edge white bloom with very attractive lime green centre upon a backdrop of fresh, fine green foliage. Very prolific flowering with masses of blooms forming dense clusters of pure white blooms. A rounded shrub growing to approximately 2m H x 1.5m W.
- **'Sarah's Delight'** (PBR): Vibrant pink wax blooms with a crimson red centre that dance upon a backdrop of fresh, fine green foliage. The blooms will provide a welcome burst of colour into late winter and early spring landscapes. A rounded shrub growing to approximately 2m H x 1.5m W.
- **'Strawberry Surprise'** (PBR): A stunning mid-pink waxflower featuring frilly flower petal formation upon a backdrop of fresh, green, fine foliage. A rounded shrub growing to approximately 2m H x 1.5m W.
- **'Moonlight Delight'** (PBR): Masses of large glossy red buds in mid winter are followed by an abundance of large white flowers with a crimson centre in early spring. The waxy white blooms flower for an extended period complimented by a backdrop of fresh, fine green foliage. A rounded shrub growing to approximately 2m H x 1.5m W.
- **'Raspberry Ripple'** (PBR): Waxflower featuring masses of dark pink crimson blooms on tall thin stems. Typically flowering in early- to mid-spring, this variety provides some welcome height to native garden plantings. A rounded shrub growing to approximately 2m H x 1.5m W.

Variety - the spice of life

By Clive Larkman

Over the past two months I have written about some of the key aspects of chillies. These are a very popular plant in Australian gardens and are starting to get the same sort of following as the humble tomato. Indeed for many people they will be the catalyst to starting a vegetable or herb garden. At Renaissance Herbs we see this exotic plant as a mainstay of the local garden. Some will stay with the non-hot capsicum whilst others will experiment with different heat levels.

Capsicum varieties

The simple capsicum is an under used vegetable in Australian cooking which is surprising due to the number of immigrants from countries where it is so widely used. Like so many vegetables we have come to accept that what we are offered in the supermarket is the best. This is sad as the defining selection criterion for a supermarket vegetable is not its flavour, not its health benefit nor its colour or texture. It is the transportability, storability or stackability of the produce that has the greatest weight when selecting cultivars.

Nurseries have a much wider selection of cultivars as their choices are based on availability and ease of growth. Most good garden centres will offer five or more cultivars to choose from. These will vary in colour, shape, flavour and harvesting. In most cases one is not better than the other, just different. I recommend growing several different ones as variety is the spice of life and food is the reason to live. Again, the offering of chilli in the supermarket is abysmal. I recently surveyed all our local supermarkets - Woolworths, Coles, Aldi and IGA. Some had no

Chilli Aji Yellow	long yellow	medium heat
Chilli Bhut Jolokai	rectangular red	extreme heat
Chilli Black Cuban	rounded black	medium heat
Chilli Cabai Burong	long red	medium heat
Chilli Cayenne Lilac	long purple	mild heat
Chilli Czech Black	rectangular black	mild heat
Chilli Firecracker	rectangular red	medium heat
Chilli Habanero	rectangular red	high heat
Chilli Habanero White	rectangular white	high heat
Chilli Hungarian Black	long black	mild heat
Chilli Hungarian Hot Wax	long white	medium heat
Chilli Italian White Wax	rectangular white	medium heat
Chilli Jalapeno	long green	mild heat
Chilli Long Cayenne	long thin red	mild heat
Chilli Manzano Orange	rectangular orange	medium heat
Chilli Pequin	small red	high heat
Chilli Purple Bird	small purple	high heat
Chilli Purple Tiger	long purple	medium heat
Chilli Red Scotch Bonnet	small red	high heat
Chilli Serrano	long green	high heat
Chilli Tabasco	long red	medium heat
Chilli Tepin	small red	extreme heat
Chilli Thai Mild	rounded red	mild heat
Chilli White Fire	rounded white	high heat
Chilli Yatsufusa	rounded red	medium heat
Chilli Zimbabwe Bird	rounded red	high heat