

Drought Special Report: Not So Dry Down Under

| Amanda Mackinnon

>> Published Date: 9/26/2012

The Australian nursery industry did the “hard yards” for a good 10 years during drought conditions. More than 350 businesses are said to have folded and a 40% drop in consumer demand was recorded over the drought period.

To give you an indication of the impact of the drought, since 2006 the average rainfall in South Australia was the lowest since 1900. Most capital cities faced a major water crisis with water storages down by more than 50%. Melbourne had rainfall up to 90% below the average, further exacerbated by record high temperatures. Dam levels got to as low as 27% of capacity.

The drought pushed consumers towards water-wise plants and triggered a nationwide trend toward hardy plants such as cordylines and grasses. The look was minimalistic to say the least, with the emphasis on structure rather than colour.

Australian natives did well during this time, with some native nurseries even taking out major business awards. It's a savvy businessman that can quickly adapt to changing trends.



pictured: A display of drought-tolerant plants in Australia, which focus more on texture and structure than color.

One note of warning: the emergence of some inferior native varieties onto the market throughout this period meant some Aussie plants got a bad rap for being straggly and not great on the blooming front. It's interesting, however, that the native market has now been reinvigorated by the need to improve and adapt in order for Australian natives to maintain their foothold in garden design.

The latest wave of Australian plant breeders has responded by building confidence that new varieties are not only bred specifically for our conditions, but offer outstanding performance and look sensational, too. They have demonstrated their merits by running

exceptional marketing campaigns, and consumer support for these tried-and-tested varieties is high.

The effect of the drought also prompted Australia's top producers to quickly identify the need for future proofing. Over the past five years investment in smart water-saving techniques and technology has been substantial. The country's leading growers report savings of up to 90% in water costs by investing in state-of-the-art recycling systems. Many were successful in accessing government and industry subsidies to support their innovative approaches. What a great demonstration of Australian commitment to water conservation.

And now—hurray!—the drought has broken! Now that the water restrictions have lifted and the focus on gardens is back, things are looking up Down Under. Nurseries and garden centres are starting to make reasonable profits again and, just like in the U.S., there is a focus on edibles and home produce.

Colour is certainly sweeping the country and magazines are jumping for joy at being able to print gorgeous shots of stunning flowers once again. Hellebores, dianthus and tibouchinas are all walking out the door into Australian gardens. It's like a national celebration!

Whilst the consumer demand for colour is high, it seems some retailers are slow to respond. With the grip of the drought still in their memories, a significant number have been slow to respond to the changes and growers report a battle with getting a commitment for good numbers. For those who have taken the plunge though, business is thriving.

So now you have an understanding of what Aussies mean by “hard yards.” It's been a difficult decade, but with the final two regions of the country being declared drought-free in April 2012, horticulture is on the move once again. **GP**

Amanda Mackinnon is the Operations and Communications Manager at Plants Management Australia. To find out more visit www.pma.com.au