

## Industry Training, Doing it Our Way

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Ensuring the next crop of nursery propagators has the right skills is an important issue. We need to have a training system that turns out professional propagators ready to face the challenges of the future. That training system is changing and our involvement is crucial if the level of professionalism is to be retained and even improved.

Changes to the Australian training system have been happening for some time. If you are not involved in education then you may not have caught up with some of the latest developments. We now have Competency Based Training and Assessment, National Curriculum, and a different way of government funding arrangements. "Doing it my way" for a trainer is vastly different to what it was even a few years ago. The changes are not complete and I see that we will never go back to the old ways, good or bad. Even our present and new system will come in for further changes. Being adaptable is now a good trait for a horticultural trainer.

Competency based training is possibly the most radical aspect of the new system. Here you pass a module (or subject) if you become competent at some specific tasks, rather than attending lessons and just passing written tests. It is not possible to fail at competency based training and it is also not possible to pass without knowing all the skills necessary.

Learners can ask to have their competency assessed at any time during the lessons as it is no longer time based. A competency is able to be assessed without going to classes at all! I like competency based training although it is definitely more complex and time consuming for horticultural trainers.

Accepting this approach requires that the necessary skills are well defined and that the assessment event to ascertain if the skill has been learnt is fair. I feel we have the first aspect in hand but as yet have not come fully to grips with the assessment side of things.

The nursery industry has a national curriculum, a list of competencies, developed over time with educators and industry leaders. We all owe a debt of gratitude to those who gave their time to this project. Courses based on these competencies are being developed and will become available in the next few years. In Victoria, Queensland, and Western Australia pilot programs of the first course are being run, with full implementation expected next year.

An integral basic in competency based training is that each learner needs to be assessed to see if a skill has been learnt. Producing a fair assessment event to determine if the person has the skills is the key here. It is easy if it is a skill like digging a trench. Just give them access to the tools and say "dig". If the trench is straight, deep enough, completed in time, and the tools used were correct you can be sure they have the necessary skill. Now think what you would need to do to assess a learners ability to take semihardwood cuttings, or even hand watering a propagation bench? Ask two propagators that one, and I'm sure you will end up with three answers.

Saying "not yet competent" in competency based assessment is difficult. No one likes to be told they have not yet demonstrated a skill well enough. It is easier to pass

than not to, particularly if the skill is almost learnt. Also it may reflect on the ability of the trainer to teach the skill and usually means extra work to reassess at a later time. In a perfect world assessors would not also be trainers. I view this aspect of training in a different light. Saying “yes” when the person is not good enough is more difficult in the long term. You let yourself down by not being honest, you also let the learner down who then believes they have the skill, and you let our industry down for they will accept your say so when the person applies for a job and produces a credential that certifies competency.

Driven by escalating costs under the new training system there is ‘deregulation’ of the training market. Putting this in more basic terms, courses funded by public money (and that includes apprenticeships) will be available for a large number of providers to deliver. The federal government sees three types of training provider: state, private, and industry. They will, and are, in open competition to train your new workers.

In theory they all deliver the same course to the same standards. In reality the truth is somewhat different. It is not that difficult to become an accredited provider of a horticulture training course. There are 14 at least in NSW and many of these offer no input from industry and do not have the background or experienced trainers that instil confidence. We as an industry need to support competition in training, so long as this is not at the expense of quality or industry relevance.

Obviously there is a need for a clarity in the decision-making process of who becomes your training provider. I can foresee some pretty disillusioned students and employers until the situation settles.

At the end of a course or assessment procedure a credential is produced. It will indicate which skills the graduate is competent at and whether they have achieved the right to receive a certificate, etc. This is a vast improvement on the old way, as now potential workers are able to describe in detail their level of competency. A certificate in Horticulture will indicate EXACTLY what skills the graduate has.

Despite the rhetoric of some politicians, I see a fair and National Training and Assessment System as a major challenge for the nursery industry. We need to be sure that a propagator’s skills are taught and assessed the same way in southern WA, northern QLD, and every other state or region. Leadership by industry associations (state and national), backed up by much goodwill will be the only solution to this challenge.

The nursery industry association has already shown that they see training as a major issue. Australian Horticultural Training (AHT — a “not-for-profit” division of NIAA) has been established to develop and deliver national training courses and workshops. Quality training providers as well as individual trainers are being sought to become involved in this development and delivery. AHT’s aim is to get the best bang for industry from the training buck.

This task of providing quality training is impossible if you as professionals are unwilling to become involved in the process of transferring skills to others in the industry.

The greatest strength of this industry is the pool of knowledge and love of plants that we share. We are the best people to introduce new workers to the joy of propagation. You can be involved. The rewards can be most exciting and are not just monetary. You could enthuse a youngster into propagation, and they could go on to win a Rod Tallis Award (I did). I cannot emphasise too strongly the value that a new

propagator gets from seeing an old hand still enjoying their craft even after decades on a bench.

Being a trainer or an assessor with AHT requires that certain requirements are met. This is more than what is needed as a basic requirement for most courses.

First you will need an in-depth knowledge of the module area you wish to deliver. This may include a credential such as a trade certificate or higher along with extensive experience. For propagation trainers membership of I.P.P.S. is a specific requirement. Second is a training and assessment credential or equivalent. Workplace Trainer Category II is preferred, as it allows the trainer to not only deliver effectively, but also to assess competencies. This credential will soon be offered through Australian Horticultural Training to industry using industry-relevant examples of training and assessment.

Another criteria is that you demonstrate that you are able to remain up to date in your area of expertise. Out-of-date methods not only waste time they also reflect poorly on the training organisation generally and the individual involved. A common complaint from employers is that their workers are taught methods that have long ago been replaced. Attending and involvement in I.P.P.S. is a good way to keep abreast of industry changes, but here I am talking to the converted.

“Doing it my way” in training is really “doing it the way of the Australian Nursery Industry”. Having professional, “hands-on” propagators involved is the only way that this can happen. The alternative will destroy the existing skills base and go against all that I.P.P.S. has built up in Australia over the last 25 years.