

# Overcoming the pressures of modern horticulture

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## IN A NUTSHELL

- ▶ Five Riverina horticulture businesses have demonstrated success in different ways despite the challenges of falling prices, maximising input efficiency and meeting consumer demands
- ▶ Through a partnership agreement, two neighbours agreed to share the costs associated with the installation and operation of a state-of-the-art irrigation system, to take advantage of economies of scale
- ▶ Another business has developed a risk management strategy to manage watertables and ensure sustainability
- ▶ Some of the finalists demonstrated that effectively-managed surface irrigation systems can achieve good returns per megalitre

***The finalists of the 2005 IREC Irrigated Farm Competition (Horticulture) demonstrated that innovation and flexibility, along with a 'can do' attitude, can make horticultural businesses perform.***

Recognising that declining produce prices, increased pressure for water use efficiency, and greater customer demands for consistency in product quality are pressures faced by all horticulturalists, five Riverina businesses have designed, installed, implemented and adopted a range of systems and technologies that enable them to succeed in the face of these pressures.

All finalists had outstanding aspects of their businesses from which all horticultural businesses and industries can learn.

Deciding the winner of the 2005 Irrigated Farm Competition (Horticulture) was an enjoyable task for this year's judges: Annette Pavese from Murrumbidgee Irrigation, Ron Hutton from the National Wine and Grape Industry Centre in Wagga Wagga, and Harry Creecy and Michael Grabham from NSW Department of Primary Industries in Griffith.

The finalists for the competition were:

- Dean Morris and Wayne Protheroe, Wamoon
- Sergio and Kathleen Altin, Nericon
- Adrian and Patrick De Marco, Bilbul
- Vince and Janey Ianelli, Leeton
- Rino and Nadia Mezzomo, Willbriggie

This year the judging criteria focussed on five key aspects of the farms: business planning, irrigation and drainage management, agricultural management, environmental awareness and biodiversity management, and human resource management. Each of the judges independently

allocated points to the entrants with respect to these five categories with the addition of the points providing us with the winner.

## **Innovative technology & management**

Dean Morris and Wayne Protheroe were the winners of this year's competition. The business partners faced an uncertain future on their neighbouring Wamoon properties due to declining prices, variable production and increasing costs associated with producing citrus. Innovative technology, a novel business partnership and the benefits of vertical integration were implemented to meet these challenges and change the outlook for the farms.

The centrepiece of their solution was the installation of a state-of-the-art Martinez Open Hydroponics System. This system essentially provides the trees with the water and nutrient requirements that the trees need at regular intervals during the day. The water and nutrients are supplied through a high tech drip irrigation system which feeds the trees with a cocktail of nutrients to maintain high levels of production. Obviously this technology is not cheap, and that is where the business partnership came into play. Through a partnership agreement the neighbours agreed to share the costs associated with the installation and operation of the irrigation system to take advantage of economies of scale. This novel approach means the high cost of the system head-works and operating costs are spread across a greater area resulting in a reduced cost on a per hectare basis. So far, the system is meeting the expectations of increased production and more consistent fruit quality and yields.

## **Vertical integration**

Improving the quantity, quality and consistency of farm



production was only part of the response to meeting the challenges that the partnership faced. Vertical integration of the business to take affirmative action on the marketing of their products was seen as a necessary step for the partnership. To achieve this Dean became a member of the Riversun Export Board and Managing Director of the Skyron Packing House. This vertical integration of the business took control of marketing the farm products and assisting with risk management. From the judges' perspective, this contributed significantly to the partnership receiving the award.

The judges were also impressed with the lengths that the winners had gone to in their efforts to ensure the success of their investment. Keeping abreast with technological changes is a time consuming task, and all too often hi-tech systems are installed without the growers having the backup support required to assist them in learning how to operate and maximise production from their new system. This clearly was not the case on the Wamoon properties. Frequent visits by overseas experts and international trips to access the knowledge to keep their system working at peak performance was part of the business operation.

### Focus on sustainability

Sergio and Kathleen Altin were runners up in the competition. As pioneers in drip irrigation technology, the Altins have continued to develop their business with outstanding management of all aspects of their business. Significant attention has been focussed on the sustainability of their farming operations. The Altins realised the potential impact that salinity could have some time ago, and have implemented a management system that ensures irrigations are scheduled to minimise accessions to the watertable while monitoring watertable heights as part of their risk management strategy. This management technique along with excellent cover crop management, to improve soil structure and rainfall infiltration, assists in achieving their


goals for environmental sustainability.

The Altin's focus on effective risk management also extends to the occupational health and safety of farm workers and chemical management. An induction process ensures that new workers or visitors to the farm are aware of the potential risks and understand the methods in place to manage these risks. Risk management also carries across to their chemical management with their chemical inventory and chemical store being first rate. The Altins operate their farm under a HACCP system ensuring a quality product is delivered to their customers.

### Industry leaders

All the finalists this year had stand out qualities from which other Riverina growers can learn. While many view furrow irrigation as the bane of the irrigation world, it was demonstrated by our finalists this year that when effectively managed good returns per megalitre can be achieved with well managed surface systems.

Native vegetation is not often associated with horticultural development, but this year the judges saw some properties integrating native vegetation into their planning, using novel approaches and partnerships to address community concerns.

This year's finalists of the Irrigated Farm Competition received the recognition that they deserve as leaders of the horticulture industries in the Riverina. 

### Further information

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**Figure 1** Wayne Protheroe & Dean Morris of Wamoon used innovative technology, a novel business partnership and the benefits of vertical integration to meet the challenges of the industry and change the outlook for their farms



**Figure 2** Sergio and Kathleen Altin of Nericon were pioneers in drip irrigation technology and have continued to develop their business with outstanding management focussing on sustainability and workplace safety