

# Horticulture's exotics look to dip in the mainstream

By BRAD COOPER

**I**S IT POSSIBLE to grow a crop for love and money or do you have to choose one over the other? That was the question posed on Queensland's Sunshine Coast recently when two relative minnows of the horticulture industry, the persimmon and custard apple growers, met together for their first joint conference.

It is a sign that the two commodity groups are working to achieve similar goals, mainly increase domestic consumption by switching the focus off the fruits' exotic status and accentuating its mainstream appeal.

"Unfortunately we're positioned with the exotics in most peoples' minds and that's often the case with their fridges as well and where we're located in the supermarket, but we're working on this," says Persimmons Australia president Stephen Jeffers (pictured).

With major export markets like Singapore, Thailand and Malaysia hungry for our persimmons, the time is right, says this grower from Nambour, for persimmon growers to get serious about the future and the potential of the crop's consumer appeal at home.

It was the reason why organisers of this year's event themed the conference 'Growing for Love or Money' in an attempt to shift the perception of persimmon and custard apple growing away from the preserve of the lifestyle farmers and onto large scale commercial operators.

If Mr Jeffers estimations are correct, the numbers of persimmons produced and marketed are trending in the right way to match the rhetoric and marketing spin.

From an export business that was probably shipping 300 to 500 trays overseas annually in the mid 1990s, Mr Jeffers says that figure could climb as high to 100,000 trays exported this year.

Total production in the mid 1990s was about 200,000 trays whereas now it is edging 600,000 trays little more than a decade later.

Mr Jeffers says the industry is now in its 'consolidation' phase after enjoying explosive growth through the last decade, resulting in the doubling of growers in that time.

"It's now time to get down to business to decide if we want to grow for love or money. Hopefully we can still achieve a bit of both," Mr Jeffers says.

Australian Custard Apple Growers Association secretary Patty Stacey said there were still many lifestyle growers in the industry, and therefore that should be catered to in any strategies going forward.

"Many custard apple and persimmon growers remain in the industry for the 'lifestyle' choices they offer," she said.

"This conference was a means to ensure they remain not only up to date but run profitable enterprises through adopting the latest research and growing techniques."

Queensland Primary Industries Minister, Tim Mulherin, said that while not many people were aware of the significance of the custard apple and persimmon industries, they were an important primary industry for the state.

"Ninety five percent of Australian persimmons are based on Japanese sweet persimmon varieties that have little or no tannin and can be eaten like an apple, or if preferred when soft," he said.



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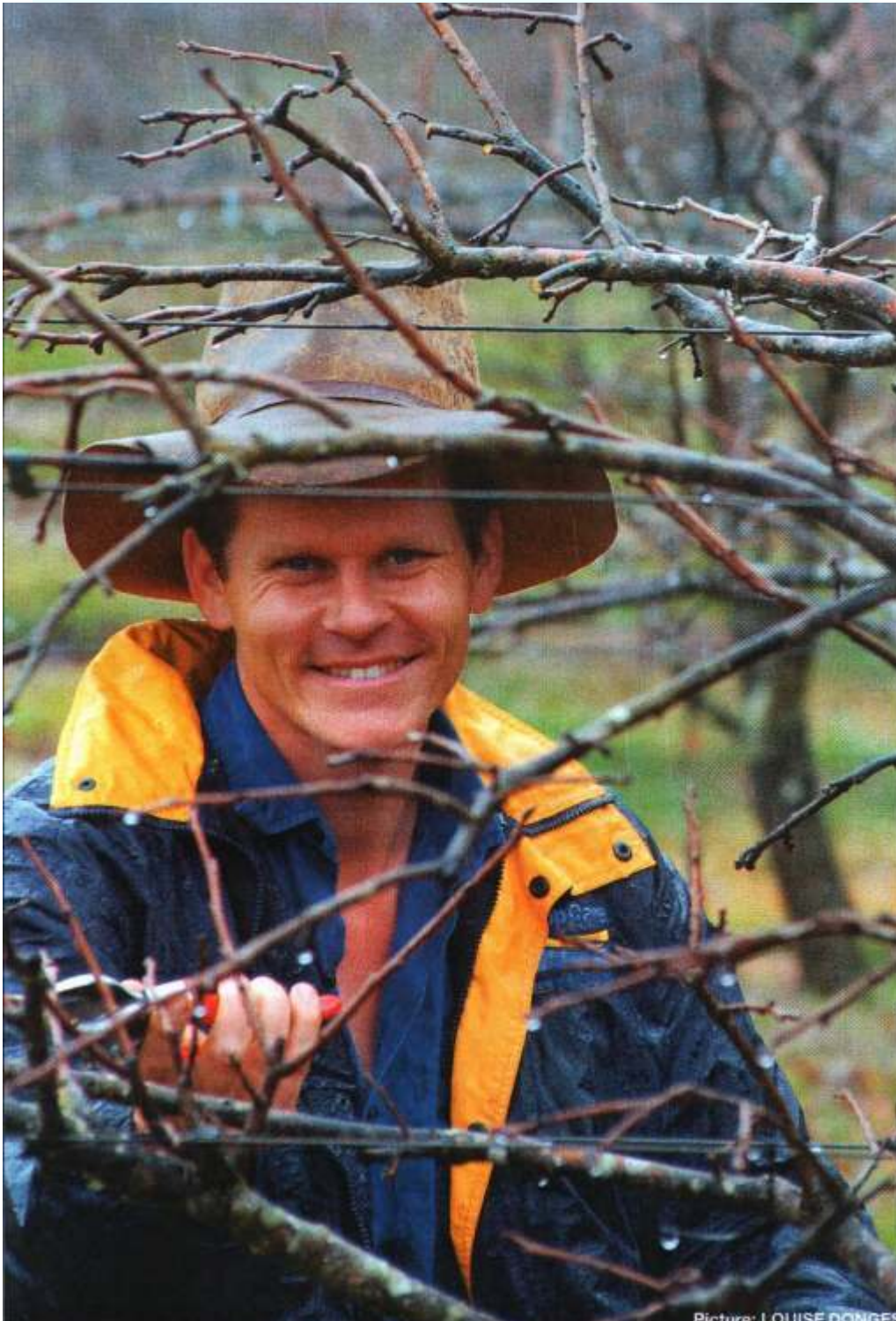
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“Persimmons grow all over Australia and the industry is worth \$15 million to the country and \$7 million to Queensland alone. The custard apple industry is worth \$10-12 million in Australia.

“Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries staff are working on a three

year project funded by the persimmon industry and by Horticulture Australia Limited called ‘Development of the Australian Sweet Persimmon Industry’ that focuses on the soft-fruit problem, better crop management and pest controls.”



Picture: LOUISE DONGES