

Q&A with...

Michael Dent

Aloe-Aloe Horticulture, Tamborine, Qld

Q What does Aloe-Aloe specialise in?

A While there are more than 500 different species of aloes in the world, we specialise in hybrid aloes which have proven themselves, through extensive trials, to be the best performers in Australian garden conditions. They have been bred in South Africa for adaptability to home garden conditions and for spectacular flowering – that is, flowering as young plants with big, long-lasting flowers. Our aloes were first launched 18 months ago and we have now licensed other growers around the country. We have significant commercial numbers including large sizes and now have 16 different hybrid aloes on the market with Aloe Bottlebrush being our latest release in October.

Q Who are your main customers?

A We sell through many channels – landscapers, independent garden centres, large national chains and mail order distributors. We have made a big effort to make our plants easily available to gardeners outside of the traditional urban areas as these aloes are particularly suited to the harsh environment of regional Australia.

Q Do you export? If so, what advice would you offer others thinking of exporting?

A We have strong interest from abroad as these aloes are the outcome a 35-year breeding program and are all available in tissue culture from Australia for ease of export. We are working with a number of international companies. Understanding the overseas markets is one of the biggest challenges for all exporters.

Q How has the business adapted to meet challenges?

A Historically to the gardening community, aloes have been little known and less understood. The stigma of aloe vera (an unattractive, unruly plant that is predominantly used for medicinal purposes), the notion that aloes are “granny plants”, the incorrect perception that aloes are all “desert plants” which do not like rain, the inability of many pure species of aloe to survive if grown in the wrong climatic zone and the poor flower performance of many aloes currently on the market have all been a challenge for us. We are promoting mature, spectacularly flowering specimens so the flower performance can be seen. We have a structured promotion campaign through expos, fairs and talks at garden clubs. We have an exciting new story to tell. These new aloe varieties are specifically bred as garden perennials to be used as bedding plants that provide a show of long-lasting colour, often in challenging conditions.



Aloe-Aloe's Michael Dent says he's excited about the industry. - Picture: Newspix/Mike Batterham.

Q What support do you offer your customer base?

A Because of poor consumer knowledge on aloes we provide a lot of material on the Aloe-Aloe website to which the retailers refer or share with their customers. Glossy brochures and other point of sale materials such as posters of the plants in flower have made a big difference. The garden media have been very supportive as they like new things and recognise the importance of sustainability.

Q What advice would you offer fellow growers?

A Partner with like-minded people who share your vision and who are also prepared to take that leap of faith to try something new because it is very easy to grow yesterday's 'safe' products.

Q If you could change something in the industry what would it be?

A One of the big challenges in the industry is transport as moving product across our vast continent is a huge cost that really does bite into your bottom line.

'Plants are essential for our good health and happy soul but consumers cannot keep on relying on reticulated water'

Q What is happening in your market?

A Consumers are looking to put colour and diversity back in the garden and while sustainability used to be a buzz word, it is now an essential part of our behaviour. Australia is a country of extremes – drought, flooding, heat and cold – the plants we use have to be tough and be able to adapt to these extremes. Our hybrid aloes will do that and still provide colourful flowers – they are a plant for the future.

Q What does the future hold?

A I am excited about the future of our industry. Plants are essential for our good health and happy soul but consumers cannot keep on relying on reticulated water to keep them alive. Creating gardens is a big investment and we need to provide consumers with plant choices that are sustainable in the long term.