

It's a long and winding road to your garden bed.

By Kathy Errey, Payneham Plant Wholesalers

Overheard anyone muttering about the price of plants these days? It's easy to jump to conclusions about how easy it would be to stick a few twigs in a nice pot and start your own growing concern.

As the price of basic living sky-rockets, we decided to explore why plants are actually still great value for your money.

So you are walking around your garden centre, hardware store or supermarket looking at some glossy foliage in a snazzy pot. But where did it actually originate? Well, not from out the back of the shop. It started its journey on the long and winding road to your garden bed quite some time before.

The plants in your trolley made their way from one of 4,000 production nurseries Australia-wide.

Where is Nostradamus when they need him?

Production nurseries would do well to be able to see into the future. Having to predict consumer purchases up to four years in advance of the plant being sold to a retail garden centre is no mean feat. It is a speculative business, with an end product that is extremely vulnerable to weather patterns and has a limited shelf life.

Established plant varieties are selected based on past performance as well as changing trends. By pot luck, no pun intended, a particular plant may end up being showcased on a TV gardening or renovation show and go gangbusters, or drop by the wayside through lack of consumer interest.

Customised for your garden bed

Exciting, new plant varieties are being bred constantly. Breeding new plants is a specialty. Plant growers have established relationships with breeders from whom they select new plants with potential. If the source is from overseas, the plant is quarantined for three months to ensure it isn't a weed threat and is free of pests and diseases. The plant is then sent out to growers in each State for a 12-month trial to prove itself in Australian conditions.

Out of 20 new discoveries, only 3-4 plants are commercially viable and it can take up to four years to get the plant to the retail market. Breeders recoup their costs through Plant Breeder's Rights or PBR, where a portion of the plant sale is returned to the breeder. It is illegal to propagate and sell plants without the permission of the holder of the PBR.

Soils ain't soils

Soil is a critical component in plant health and shelf life. A good nursery will use a high quality growing media made by a specialist soil manufacturer. Aged and composted pine bark will be converted to a quality soil by strictly controlled processes. The bark will be pasteurized and during this process will be monitored for heat and moisture content. The temperature must be maintained at 55°C to eliminate the bad bugs. The soil is turned and aerated to maintain this temperature. If the soil overheats, it will destroy beneficial bacteria. The soil is also monitored for ph, salt levels, ammonia and nitrate and, at the end of the process, the ph is adjusted and fertilizers added to suit the production nursery requirements.

A test of a good potting media is its water holding capacity and rewettability. Beware of plants being sold in peaty soil that dries out rapidly and is impossible to rewet.

The beginnings of a long and happy life

Plants are grown from seed, cutting or division and are transplanted into a tube to optimize plant health and growth. Traditionally, these tubes have been made of plastic, but nurseries are now moving to a new biodegradable tube made of vegetative material. As these tubes eventually break down when exposed to carbon dioxide and water, the plant doesn't need to be separated from the tube, significantly reducing transplant shock. Different climates, soil conditions and plant types affect the rate of decomposition.

The nursery industry has always been extremely labour intensive and most nurseries are now making significant financial investments in semi-automated machinery. The tubed plant is then

potted into the end-product container, usually a plastic pot. Whilst plastic has a reputation for being environmentally unsustainable, plants need a container that is resilient to the effects of the environment and maintains performance and appearance for many months and sometimes years. Plastic is robust, lightweight and easy to transport. It is made from a waste product from the petroleum industry and the pots are manufactured on high-tech, relatively low energy use injection-moulding machines. And, of course plastic stores carbon and is infinitely recyclable.

Aged with tender loving care

Once potted, plants generally spend a minimum of six months at the production nursery being watered, fertilized and weeded until they are hardened for outdoor conditions and at a size ready for sale to a retail garden centre. Plants are then hand picked, labeled and dispatched.

Is \$19.99 expensive for a product that takes 4 years to produce?

Have a think about it as you put a couple of extra ones in your trolley this weekend.