

9 Cool Things About Tasmania ... Yes, Tasmania



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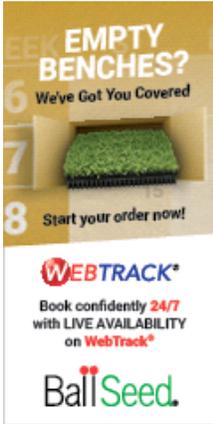
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COMING UP THIS WEEK:

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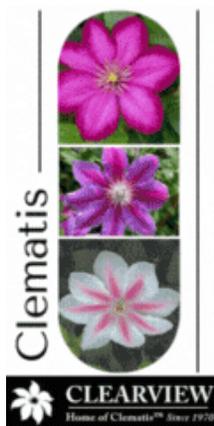


NEW FOR 2027



PW
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Hello from Hobart!



And I'm not talking Indiana. Or the factory that makes big industrial mixers. I'm talking Hobart, Tasmania, Australia, where I've been touring nurseries and speaking to the every-other-year meeting of the NGIA—Nursery and Garden Industry Australia. The group rotates its meeting between each of Australia's seven states and Tasmania got the nod this year. And I got the call to come down and share some trends and money-making ideas from the U.S. and the rest of the world ... and who am I to turn down a trip to an exotic location?

Don't confuse Tasmania with Tanzania, in Africa. Or Transylvania, the historical region of Romania noted for its vampires. Tasmania is an island (the 26th largest in the world) off the coast of southeast Australia, straight below Melbourne and is known for its Tasmanian Devils. Westerners of the British Empire inhabited it as a penal colony in the 1800s. It's named for Dutch explorer Abel Tasman. The locals seem to relish their island's colorful history.

And here I am for five days—one of tours, two of conference and 1 1/2 of general sightseeing and garden center hopping before flying back to Sydney and then home to Chicagoland. What have I learned that's worth sharing? Here are nine things:

Small, but big

Tasmania is about the size of Ireland or West Virginia—226 miles north to south and 190 miles east to west. But don't expect to zip around it in a day ... we quickly discovered that distances that look short on the map are long via the winding roads. We confined our explorations to within a couple hours of Hobart, on the southeast coast.

Population is only about 500,000, with half of those folks living in and around Hobart, a pretty coastal city surrounded by hills and harbors. It's pretty dry right now, in summer, and the moderate temperatures, brown hills, blue skies and combination of arid, Mediterranean and tropical plants remind me of California—walking outside in the morning feels just like I'm getting ready to visit a Spring Trial in Ventura or Gilroy.

I was amazed to learn that Hobart is at latitude 42.88 south, and my home in Chicago is nearly identical, at 41.88 north. Yet the similarities end there, due to Tasmania being surrounded by water. The average temperature in summer (December-March) is 62F to 73F, with winter (May-August) averaging 37F to 51F—pretty idyllic, if you ask me. However, the record high is 108F and the record low is 8.6F. The plant material is tropical, Mediterranean and arid—a really nice mix. You could have fun gardening here.

Given the small size of the population, the industry is small, too—I'm told about 12 main growers and two dozen or so independent retailers. Plus, hundreds of backyard amateur nurseries that operate under the radar. The Australia big-box chain, Bunnings, has a strong presence here, with seven stores. Mitre 10, a competitor, has six stores (according to their Website, anyway). We visited one of each and they were fine, rivaling anything you'd see in the states.

No more windy-day worries.





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A bit behind the times ... but striving to modernize

Residents will admit that trends start in Europe, reach Australia next and hit Tassie last. (I suspect that's changing with the Internet). Driving around, the architecture looks a bit dated; for instance, the hotel/casino in which I'm staying dates from the '40s and '70s, and looks like it from the exterior (the rooms have been modernized and are super nice, however). I've been told there are plans to build an all-new facility, but regulations, restrictions and battles with environmentalists have delayed construction. And the beauty of the Island has developers drooling to break ground on fancy new resorts and developments, if only they could get approval to do so.

The three nurseries I visited on Monday were a mixed bag of history, as well. Stop 1, Tibball's, was founded in 1946 by Craig Tibball's grandfather, who grew tomatoes. Dad added bedding plants, houseplants and interiorscaping. The low-guttered lap-glass greenhouse is at least 60 years old, Craig told me—still effective, but hardly efficient. He uses it mainly for fast-turning vegetable seedlings. The site is a hilly, lumpy patchwork of concrete, with assorted hoop houses and open growing areas. However, this site served mainly for transplanting, plus growing-on of quick-turn crops; he's got a second location in nearby Brighton that's more up-to-date, where he finishes his herbs, "potted color" (the Aussie term for 4-in. annuals) perennials and cyclamen. Here's Craig with his daughter, Georgia, who works at the nursery part-time.

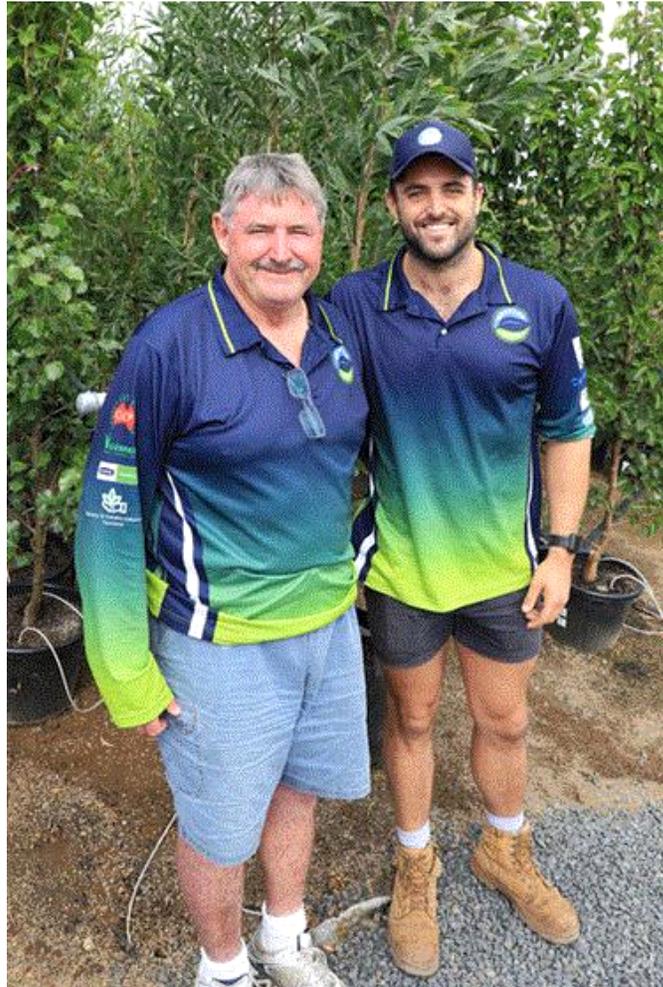


Stop 2, Granton Plants, only dates to 1986, when Damian Kerin started a retail nursery in town.

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Like all retailers, he decided to vertically integrate, adding production facilities. “We’ve grown everything,” he says of their history. His brother eventually took over the retail and he and his son, Joe, became strictly wholesale. However, they realized they missed the interaction with the end consumer, so now they’re open to the public, too, running a very tidy retail operation at their production facility. They mostly do trees and shrubs, including natives.



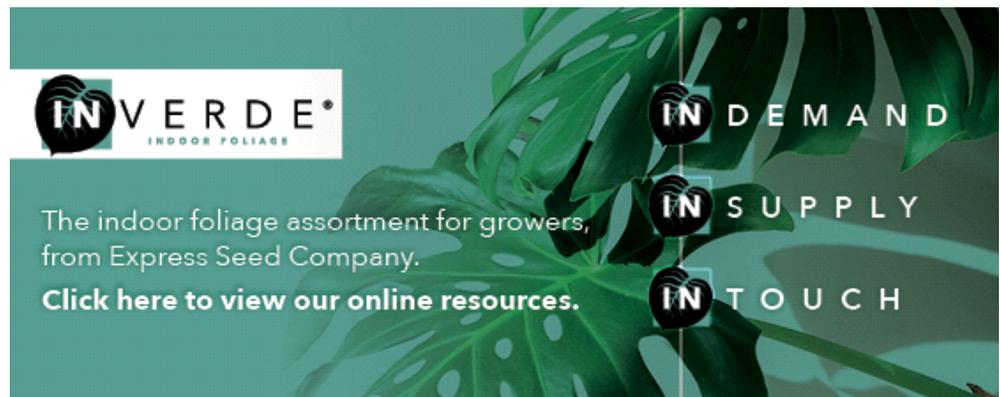
Stop 3 was Westland Nurseries, which, at 65 acres, is the largest nursery in Tasmania. About two-thirds of that space is in production. This is a new, flat location next to the airport, so it was the most modern of the three, with a mix of open growing area and poly frost protection structures, plus one 40,000 sq. ft. Dutch Venlo-style glass house, which surprised me. What did they need with a Dutch glass house? Well, said third-generation-owner Mark van der Staay, the frame is used, and the glass is from China. In other words, it wasn’t as expensive as it appeared. Westland uses it to grow color, including poinsettias, hydrangeas and cyclamen, as well as foliage. Pictured is Mark (right) with his twin brother, Luke, and dad, Tony (who reminded me of Greg Norman).



Nurseries are vertically integrated to the extreme

That's out of necessity, I was told, since there are so few resources readily available. Plus, the import restrictions are very tight coming into Tasmania, to prevent the spread of insects or disease. Young plant companies, such as Ball Australia, have to jump through hoops to certify and inspect anything going to Tasmania from the mainland. So growers tend to do most of their own propagation and they grow just about everything to make sure they can offer their customers what they need. There doesn't seem to be much room for specialization.

There are ways for mainland operations to operate in Tasmania, however. Australia's largest producer, Oasis Horticulture, has gotten its foot in the door by contracting with Tibball's, who contract-grows the company's brands for distribution to Bunning's and IGCs.



No worries

You know how Aussies love to say, “No worries!” It’s pretty much replaced, “You’re welcome.” Well, I always ask business owners, “What keeps you up at night?” and I didn’t find anyone who doesn’t sleep like a baby.

Unlike the U.S., labor costs and availability didn’t come up as major nightmares. It’s a challenge, but the minimum wage is already over \$17 AUS an hour. Efficiency is on their minds, however; at Tibball’s, despite the humble exterior, I saw an Urbinati drum seeder, Hamilton transplanter and Demtec carousel pot filler. Craig said he’s got a punnet (pack) dispenser coming soon. And at Westland, where they grow hundreds of thousands of 14-cm pots of woodies, natives and perennials, they use a buffer table and forklift system that moves 120 pots at a time in and out of the nursery.

One of the reasons Joe Kerin doesn’t worry is because he enjoys the relatively small size of his family’s business. “It isn’t too big, and it doesn’t get away from you.” You can “bend like bamboo” he says, when dealing with challenges.



The masters of the tag

I reported this the first time I visited Australia: It’s hard to find a plant at retail that doesn’t have a big, colorful tag in it. Sometimes it’s a brand, other times it’s just a variety label, always it’s flashy and quite often creative in its design. In part, it’s because much of what they sell is green, including small annual seedlings in “punnets,” or packs, that are just one big cell with six or so seedlings in them. “Potted colour” is their term for what we recognized as 4-in. or 5-in potted annuals.



Damian Karin showed me something I'd never seen before: a "talker"—a secondary tag that you add to a stick tag. It lets you add information about the plant, such as in the hebe example: It's hanging, trailing and cascading. The talker also makes your simple stick tag 3D.



Safety first



The British Empire countries all have one thing in common: strict workplace health and safety rules. As we got on the bus for the conference's production tour, we were issued an orange safety vest to wear at each stop. Stylish ... and not once did a forklift get anywhere near me, so I guess it's effective.



Harmony Garden Centre



Meet Andrew and Angela Clark, who two years ago bought Harmony Garden Centre from Andrew's dad, then went on a full-fledged updating of the business, taking it from traditional old-time nursery to hip vintage industrial hangout, complete with farmer's market and wood-fired pizza dinners.

We love the look that Angela brought to the business: They built a new greenhouse and the first thing she did is paint the galvanized frame a deep, almost black gray. Brick, natural wood, galvanized metal, heavy industrial lights and some vintage block & tackle hardware set the scene. Signage is black with white lettering, with (to our eyes) just the right font.





The business has some rough edges—there’s plenty still to make over—but Andrew and Angela look poised to create a very nice urban garden center destination.



My pick plant of the trip

What with two botanical gardens (Sydney and Tasmania), three wholesale nurseries and six or eight garden centers, I’ve seen lots of really cool plants that are indigenous to the region. Eucalyptus, grevillea, tree ferns, acacias, leptospermum ... but my favorite of all was a bulb at the Royal Tasmanian Botanical Gardens called *Brunsvigia josephinae*, or Josephine’s lily or candelabra lily. From South Africa and in the *Amaryllidaceae* family, this looks like a giant amaryllis bulb that sends up thick stalks that culminate in a fireworks display of red flowers out on the end of long pedicles. I don’t know if this is something that could be commercialized or not, but it sure is spectacular!



A face for radio



I've been on the radio only once in America; now I've been on it twice in Australia. This time, it was in an interview with host Tony Briscoe for an Australia Broadcast Company show called "Country Hour." It's Australia's oldest radio program, dating back to the end of World War II, when the government thought it would help connect and cheer up the country's population. Tony's line of questioning revolved around labor, young people, my background, trends in plants and the new IDM-resistant impatiens from PanAmerican Seed. Tony also puts me on the spot by asking if I have a green thumb.

You can listen to the 11-minute interview [HERE](#).

Finally ...



Yes, I did get to see a Tasmanian Devil ... at Bonorong Wildlife Sanctuary. About the size of a raccoon, they looked more cute than devilish ... other than the red ears and serious teeth, that is. Saw koalas, wombats and more than 120 kangaroos, too, who were so overfed by the tourists that all they did was lounge under the gum trees. Great fun!

Back in Chicago next week with the regular reporting ... then I'll let you know about what's next on the travel itinerary.

See you next time!

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Chi".

Chris Beytes
Editor
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