



Taking on world hunger

Tasmanian agricultural scientist Bruce French has devoted his life to collating the world's most complete and comprehensive database of edible plants.

Billions of people across the world's developing nations suffer daily from hunger and chronic malnutrition.

Figures show that 18,000 people per day, or one child every 4-5 seconds, die from malnutrition.

What's more, two billion people, mainly women and children, suffer from a lack of essential micronutrients such as Vitamin A and iron.

Unfortunately, this story is not new. For generations aid organisations and programs have continued to lead an exhaustive effort towards addressing these humanitarian issues.

The magnitude and scope of the problem would seem insurmountable.

Yet an Australian agricultural scientist's concept of "helping the hungry feed themselves" has fast gained international attention.

Tasmanian scientist Bruce French has devoted his life to collating the world's most complete and comprehensive database of edible plants.

His work in developing countries has led to the creation of a database which now includes over 24,000 edible plants.

His approach in the fight against global malnutrition and hunger is really quite simple – there needs to be more done than just supplying food.

The food needs to be local, readily available and fully nutritional. The food sources need to be indigenous or well adapted to that community.

The database contains descriptions, countries and climatic zones of the plants' origins, photos and drawings of entire plants and edible parts, and cooking methods.

The information can be reproduced in a number of formats including CD, DVD, books and PowerPoint presentations.

In 2007, the database, Food Plants International, captured the attention of the Rotary Club of Devonport North District 9830 in Tasmania.

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Editorial...

Ian Macleod
 Managing Director

The greatest asset to any business is its people.

To be successful in business, the bottom line is second to the efforts and enthusiasm of your employees.

This is what I believe makes a business truly successful.

At Peracto we have worked hard to create a supportive and nurturing environment for our workforce.

I believe that a work environment which seeks to provide a balance across both professional and personal aspects helps to ensure you attract and retain the best people for the job.

So it was with great pleasure and pride that we were awarded a Tasmanian Employers of Choice award last year.

The awards are held by the State Government and provide an opportunity for Tasmanian businesses and enterprises to be publicly acknowledged for their efforts towards providing positive and productive workplace practices.

It's a real feather in our cap that we are among a select group who are seen as great employers.

It is no longer a one way street when it comes to employing individuals.

Businesses need to offer challenging and rewarding career paths, which also address a work/life balance.

We recognise the need to be flexible with employees through negotiating contracts on an individual basis which helps to deliver the best outcomes for everyone. Some of our in-house professional development opportunities include offering specialty training, inter-office transfers across Australia and a variety of career path options within the organisation. Our Graduate Development Program also plays a significant role.

The Employer of Choice network provides a forum for collaboration between like-minded organisations, and I look forward to furthering our business through continual improvement. 



Tasmanian Minister for Economic Development David O'Byrne presents the Employer of Choice award to Peracto Managing Director Ian Macleod.



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A partnership was born with the vehicle – the Learn Grow Project – helping to deliver this vital, much-needed information to the world's poorest countries.

“The project isn't about telling people what to do, our role is to provide the resources to help them better understand and value their local food plants,” Learn Grow Project chairman Buz Green said.

The project works directly with food aid providers in supplying resources, information and technical support to help locals understand which food plants are best suited to their nutritional needs.

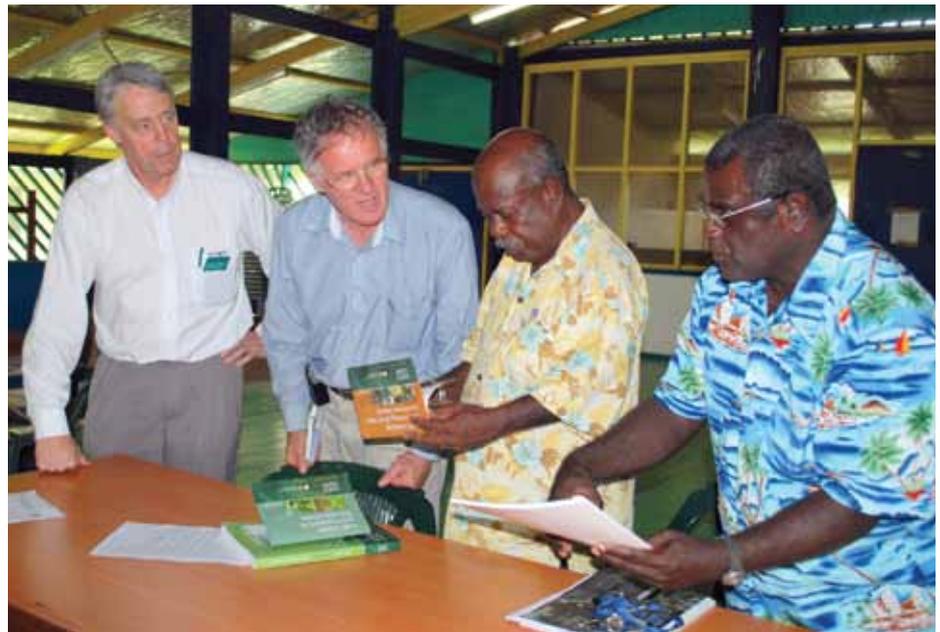
“The database is there to be used to empower people in their own countries,” Mr Green said.

“Communities in need can select from the database the plants which are most suitable to their areas.

“We provide the support and materials to guide them through this process.”

Since its inception almost five years ago, the project has gained widespread accolades.

Last year, Food Plant Solutions became one of only a handful of Rotary Action Groups to be endorsed by the Rotary International Board.



Learn Grow Project Chairman (left) Buz Green and database creator Bruce French at the project launch in the Solomon Islands.

The project has tapped into Rotary International's local and global networks too, where those involved continue to receive regular invites to speak at district conferences and international conventions.

But perhaps some of the most important milestones and successes have been the practical, on-the-ground applications.

In 2010, the Solomon Islands was the first nation to launch the program with great success.

The program's printed material attracted much interest from local organisations, and has been widely distributed through existing networks.

Locals have also been responsive to the material being available in digital format.

“The feedback we have received so far has been very supportive,” Mr Green said.

“The Solomon Islands program has been a major achievement for us.

“We worked with over 20 local organisations in helping to get the information to communities across Solomon Islands.

“It's been a big project.”

Timor Leste and Papua New Guinea are next, with the Learn Grow committee still devoting much time and energy to raising awareness of the project.

“There has been wide interest and enthusiasm in Rotary world-wide where we have developed relationships with other aid providers,” Mr Green said.

“We have about 30 volunteers globally and that number is growing.

“However, we are really in need of sponsorship at the moment.

“We are at the stage where we have grown beyond our volunteer capacity. We need to employ staff in project management and co-ordinator roles.

“We also need to develop more contacts with international food aid providers and non-government organisations to help deliver this project.

“We need more direct connections to these groups.”

People interested in supporting the Learn Grow Project or requiring more information can email info@learn-grow.org or visit www.learn-grow.org 



Talking to local experts are (from left) Buz Green, Bruce French and Mark Johnson.

SA office reaps recruitment rewards with new approach

A review undertaken by Peracto's South Australian office into the approaches of recruiting and retaining staff has paid dividends.

The review was prompted after the office continued to experience mixed results from using traditional channels for recruitment, such as advertising and recruitment agencies.

While the industry has, and continues, to struggle to attract and retain school leavers, the South Australian office has led a proactive campaign towards securing its future employment opportunities.

State Manager Richard Porter said in the past 12 months the office has employed three young people, each sharing a different path in joining Peracto.

"All three, Julian Marchant, Neil Wittwer and Tom Blake, came to us from different avenues," Mr Porter said.

"It is really tough to identify and recruit the right staff; you are continuously battling to attract quality candidates.

"For decades the numbers entering agriculture have been on the decline, as has the number of university campuses offering agriculture. I don't think the industry as a whole has always marketed itself very well.

"There now appears to be only a very small group of quality candidates

each year, which employers have to compete for."

Mr Porter's on-the-ground approach to recruiting the next generation of researchers and technical officers has seen them offer practical work experiences and further invest in key relationships.

Julian Marchant

Mr Porter said Julian came to Peracto from a non-agricultural background, where through a social friendship he became aware of Julian's desire to pursue a career change.

"Julian was originally from an ecology and tourism background and we offered him the opportunity to pursue a new career path, where we provided



Members of Peracto's South Australian office include (from left) Neil Wittwer, Tom Blake, Kym Frith, Richard Porter, Ben Hill-Ling and Julian Marchant.

additional training and support," Mr Porter said.

Julian is now a technical officer, where a majority of his work focuses on broadacre farming, in particular wheat, barley and faba beans.

Last year, his work centred on fungicide trials in wheat, barley, faba beans, potatoes and grapes.

"I enjoy the outdoor lifestyle and being busy," Julian said.

"This job provides an opportunity to learn new skills and knowledge in an outdoor environment.

"I enjoy the challenges of working solo and in a team to reach a common goal. I enjoy following a trial from commencement to harvest and seeing the end result after a season of hard work."

Neil Wittwer

Growing up on a sheep and cereal property in Mallee, Victoria, Neil Wittwer's interest in an agricultural career started long before his tertiary studies.

It was while he was studying agricultural science at the University of Adelaide that he was approached by Peracto regarding an employment opportunity.

"We do contract research work with the university and a lecturer, who is also a friend, pointed us in the direction of Neil who was one of their top students," Mr Porter said.

Neil is now the Operational Manager for the office's Plant Breeding Unit.

Neil said his interest in research was sparked when he worked with the



Neil Wittwer

university's Durum Breeding program during the semester breaks.

"Studying agricultural science at university was my way of being involved in the industry without farming," he said.

"I'm looking forward to a long, enjoyable career."

Tom Blake

Getting a taste of the real world while studying has made all the difference for the office's newest graduate recruit, Tom Blake.

Tom started with Peracto in mid 2011, working one day a week while completing his Bachelor of Agricultural Science at the University of Adelaide.

He has now joined the office in a full time role as a technical officer, assisting with GLP and efficacy studies, and the conduct of plant breeding trials.

"I grew up and worked on the family farm near Hamilton in western Victoria and always had an interest in agriculture, and also the science behind it all," Tom said.

"Studying at the University of Adelaide increased my interest in the agricultural research field.

"I am enjoying the opportunity to apply the skills I learnt at university in my work at Peracto."



Tom Blake

Mr Porter said the new approach to recruiting has made a significant impact on the business.

"All three have been outstanding candidates in their own right," he said.

"It has worked out really well for us."

The office has been recognised for its efforts in attracting and retaining staff, becoming finalists in the NAB Agribusiness Employer of Choice Awards late last year. 🌿



Julian Marchant



North Queensland office houses unique capabilities

Since joining Peracto in 2006, Chris and Gaye Monsour have steadily built the Bowen office in to providing some unique services.

1. Firstly, how did you and your wife Gaye come to work with Peracto?

I had been working in Bowen as a crop consultant since 1997 and conducted a few contract trials for Serve-Ag Research (as it was known back then). I wanted to develop my agricultural research interests and when Gaye and I decided to start our own business in 2006, we entered discussions with the Peracto management team and found that we had compatible goals and business objectives. We joined the organisation in October 2006, just as the Peracto brand was being conceived. It has been rewarding to help develop the brand and the expansion of our research capabilities nationally and internationally.

2. What is unique about the Peracto North Queensland office?

We live and work in a great part of the country where the premier winter vegetable production region is located on the doorstep of a tropical coastline and all it has to offer. From our own business' point of view, I am proud of our research farm and the advantages it provides to us and our clients. Having that capability has been a significant contributor to the growth of our business. In our first year, we had two hectares under trial crops and in 2011 we used seven hectares and conducted 60% of our trial load on our research block.

Growing our own crop also gives our staff a greater understanding of the dynamics of the crops we work with. Having ground under our control enables us to grow crops which are not grown commercially in our region, therefore expanding the range of crops we can work with. I also provide a crop monitoring service to local growers. Research clients value the feedback

we can provide from being involved in day-to-day pest management and monitoring. Clients also benefit from the experience we acquire having assessed new products during development which can be applied on farm when these products enter the market.

3. What is the Bowen office's range?

The bulk of our work is conducted along the Queensland coast between Mackay, 200 km to the south, and Townsville, 200 km to the north. Our vegetable trials are conducted in Bowen, Gumlu and the Burdekin region to the north, while trials in sugarcane and tree crops take us further afield.

4. What are some of the projects you are currently undertaking?

I have a keen interest in sustainable farming, particularly the role of soil health in improving productivity. Here, we will assess a range of soil amendments and monitor their effects on soil health

and vegetable production. Other work for the year ahead includes the assessment of new fertiliser products, biodegradable mulches and evaluations of varieties of crops, both new and current. We will also continue to refine our electronic field data capture systems for both research and consulting activities.

5. What are the issues facing the industry in North Queensland?

Labour shortages, particularly skilled professionals; rising costs of inputs, particularly labour; the supermarket fruit and vegetable price war which will put further downward pressure on grower's margins; market access and the cost of compliance; the importation of cheap fruit and vegetables; bureaucrats and policy makers who do not understand the commercial realities of agriculture in northern Australia...just to name a few.

6. Where is the industry's future heading?

The importance of the production of high quality fresh produce will increase as the world's population grows. Australian primary producers have a world class reputation and make a significant contribution to the national economy through the production of food for domestic consumption and export markets. The industry needs to promote the importance of Australian agriculture to the wider community and to attract the next generation of agricultural scientists who will support this industry in the future. There's no better time than this year - the 'Australian Year of the Farmer'. 🌱



North Queensland Manager Chris Monsour (right) receives an award from Andrew Watson.



New Queensland office takes up prime location

Peracto's expansion in Queensland has resulted in an office taking up residence in prime location.

The company's Bundaberg operations opened in July last year, headed up by South East Queensland Regional Manager Chris Themsen.

The opening of the new office compliments the Bowen operations in North Queensland, and continues to serve the growing need for on-the-ground technical and research capabilities.

The office also lies in one of the most important horticultural production regions in Australia.

"Due to an abundant water supply, stable climate and available land, we have a 12 month production cycle," Mr Themsen said.

"From avocados to snowpeas and everything else in between we are growing approximately 32 different broadacre and horticultural crops; there is no month of the year where we are not growing some sort of fruit or vegetable."

This is what defines the town and neighbouring region.



Bundaberg sits on the doorstep of the Great Barrier Reef and is traditionally known for sugar cane production.

Bundaberg and its surrounds is also home to some of Australia's largest and most diverse crops.

Capsicum, tomatoes, zucchini, chilli, snow peas, beans, cucumber, melons,

sweet potatoes, lychees, avocados, macadamias, pineapple, citrus, grapes and stone fruit showcase the breadth and depth of the region's farm practices.

This makes for quite a busy workload for Peracto too.

"Since opening, we've really hit the ground running," Mr Themsen said.

The Bundaberg office covers a 250 km radius, tending to citrus and table grape work in Central Burnett in the north, woody weed trials in Biggenden in the south and vegetable and sugar cane trials around Bundaberg and Childers.

While the area enjoys a climate ideal for plentiful cropping, it also faces its challenges.

Continual windy conditions are not ideal for trial work and the size and scope of crops requires a great deal of knowledge and know-how.

"One of the challenges for us is knowing the pest and disease spectrum, knowing when they are most active and tailoring a trial program around that period," Mr Themsen said.

Mr Themsen said the office is looking to continue to develop stronger working relationships with key clients, farmers and industry partners. 

