

Bridging the green gap[©]

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INTRODUCTION

The information I am about to present today is purely a result of speaking with people in various sectors of the horticultural industry. This is their feedback when asked what issues they have when trying to source plants or to complete their jobs as designers or installers of plants. This is in no way a criticism of anyone's business it is purely an effort to bridge the gap through communication.

- The horticultural industry consists of many sectors.
- Do you know what is happening in others sectors?
- How do you communicate with them?

As editor of Hort Journal Australia (HJA), I network constantly with many different sectors and attend many industry functions, shows, expos, and conferences. I talk to people and ask lots of questions about their businesses — in particular, I am keen to find out and share information that could help improve business for all — and in some way help to bridge the gap.

One of the most common responses is about communications or the lack of it between different sectors and what could be done to improve communications. Of course people are busy; everyone is busy, regardless of what sector you are in. Communication between them is just another job to be done.

We are bombarded with emails, social media, telephone calls, and flat out getting through our day's work. Some may say, why do I need to know what is happening in other sectors? Well, I guess that comes down to the fact that there are quite possibly business-to-business opportunities out there that could benefit all. After all, don't we all want to make a fair dollar for a fair day's work and if we do things right perhaps a bit extra?

There are already several current options that include: trade register, evergreen connect, websites, and social media. These are some of the options available for businesses to connect with suppliers, whether it is plants, pots, growing media, labels or anything associated with supplying plants or materials. What else? What do you use? How do you receiving information from suppliers via lists or images?

BRIDGING THE GAP THROUGH COMMUNICATION

Landscape architects/designers are an example of one sector. For them good communication is important for forward planning. Plant lists are wanted as are websites with good content, including mature sizes listed. Websites that crash are worse than no website. Skilled staffed are key to customer satisfaction and help with career progression.

Forward planning should take the stress from both the landscape designer/architect and also from the grower. The designer by knowing in advance what plants will be available can better design a landscape that can be installed as intended. The grower will have an idea of what they should be growing thereby reducing wastage and maximising sales.

For many commercial jobs, the project may not go ahead for anywhere between 6 months and 3 years. What plants selected now may not be available when the plants are required. Quite often the designer then has to go back to the drawing board and try to source plants that are available after that time. This is extra time for them that they do not get paid for. Many have told me they tend to reuse the same types of plants they know will be available. If you have a range of plants that you grow regularly — let designers know about them. Send them specs — growing and cultural.

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Plant availability lists

Looking at Table 1 below, what is missing from this list if you are a designer — what other information do you require?

Table 1. Example of a plant list with inadequate information.

<i>Acanthus mollis</i>	\$5.95	\$10.00	
<i>Acer</i> × <i>freemanii</i> 'Jeffersred', Autumn Blaze® Freeman maple			\$88.00
<i>Acer palmatum</i>	\$12.50	\$35.00	
<i>Acer palmatum</i> 'Senkaki'		\$35.00	\$88.00
<i>Acer palmatum</i> var. <i>dissectum</i> 'Dissectum Palmatifidum'		\$95.00	\$140.00
<i>Acer palmatum</i> var. <i>dissectum</i> 'Dissectum Variegatum'		\$95.00	\$140.00
<i>Acer palmatum</i> var. <i>dissectum</i> Dissectum Atropurpureum		\$95.00	\$140.00
Group			
<i>Acer palmatum</i> var. <i>dissectum</i> Dissectum Viride Group		\$95.00	\$140.00
<i>Acer rubrum</i> 'October Glory'			\$88.00
<i>Agapanthus</i> blue	\$4.75	\$8.20	
<i>Agapanthus</i> dwarf blue	\$4.95	\$8.20	
<i>Agapanthus</i> dwarf white	\$4.95	\$8.20	
<i>Syzygium hemilamprum</i>	\$8.50	\$32.00	\$80.00
<i>Syzygium smithii</i>	\$8.50	\$32.00	\$80.00
<i>Syzygium smithii</i> 'Allyn Magic'	\$9.50	\$35.00	
<i>Syzygium smithii</i> 'DOW30', Sublime™ acmena	\$12.70	\$35.00	\$80.00
<i>Syzygium smithii</i> 'Hot Flush'	\$10.00	\$32.00	

This type of list is probably ok for some landscapers as they are usually more “hands on” and regularly go to trade marts etc. and some are horticulturists. However, many designers are in an office situation and they require more information such as how big the plant will eventually grow — its mature size and what it looks like?

No mature plant size and no image, which might sound like a lot of work but let's look at how simple it can be in a simple table with the key data needed by the designers (Table 2).

Table 2. Simple table with key information.

Symbol	Botanic name	Common name	Qty	Pot size	Mature height and width (m)
Courtyard					
Ar	<i>Ajuga reptans</i> 'Caitlins Giant'	Ajuga	3	150 mm	0.2×1.5
Cfn	<i>Cordyline fruticosa</i> 'Negra'	Negra cordyline	3	200 mm	1.5×1
Hg	<i>Helmholtzia glaberrima</i>	Stream lily	1	200 mm	1.5×1.5
Pj	<i>Pandorea jasminoides</i>	Bower of beauty vine	2	200 mm	5×5
Sa	<i>Scaevola aemula</i>	Fan flower	4	150 mm	0.3×0.5
Rear garden					
Az	<i>Alpinia zerumbet</i>	Shell ginger	2	200 mm	2×1.5
Azv	<i>Alpinia zerumbet</i> 'Variegata'	Variegated shell ginger	1	200 mm	2×1.5
An	<i>Asplenium nidus</i>	Birds nest fern	3	200 mm	0.5-1×1.5-2
Ba	<i>Balantium antarcticum</i>	Soft tree fern	1	1 m length	2×2
Cm	<i>Clivia minata</i>	Kaffir lily	16	Moved	0.5×0.3
Drv	<i>Dianella tasmanica</i> 'Variegata'	Variegated flax lily	6	150 mm	1×0.5
Gl	<i>Guzmania</i> 'Luna'	Bromeliad	2	200 mm	0.5×0.5

Websites

Good information about the plants can also be offered through websites (Figure 1).

Acacia cognata



A fast growing native to south-eastern Australia, this is an attractive wattle with pendulous branches and beautiful weeping habit. Grows to the size of a large shrub or small tree depending on your landscape and climate. Fluffy yellow, ball shaped flowers are produced in spring.

- **Common Name:** Narrow-Leaf Bower Wattle
- **Mature Size (h x w):** 6-8 x 6m
- **Categories:** Bird Attracting, Coastal, Evergreen, Informal Screening, Native, Specimen

[More Information](#)

Figure 1. Website for *Acacia cognata* (Specialty Trees, Victoria, Australia with permission).

Figure 2 shows a snip taken from Specialty Trees, Victoria, Australia website (www.specialitytrees.com.au). You could browse a search engine put in your requirements and it came up with all this information. You land on the page shown in Figure 2 after pressing the ‘More Information’ button. This page tells you when the plant is available, uses, growing requirements, and includes another image of the plant.

Acacia cognata

Narrow-Leaf Bower Wattle



A fast growing native to south-eastern Australia, this is an attractive wattle with pendulous branches and beautiful weeping habit. Grows to the size of a large shrub or small tree depending on your landscape and climate. Fluffy yellow, ball shaped flowers are produced in spring.

- **Family:** [Mimosaceae](#)
- **Common Name:** Narrow-Leaf Bower Wattle
- **Mature Size (h x w):** 6-8 x 6m
- **Form:** [Pendulous](#)
- **Genus:** [Acacia](#)

[Add to Shortlist](#) [Download](#)

Availability

We don't have any in stock at the moment. Feel free to [contact us](#) or [add to shortlist](#) anyway, and we'll see if we can find it for you.

Uses

As a small feature tree it looks great mass planted in the open or under the shade of bigger, taller trees. A good option for soft screening. Looks great combined with bold foliage and with other plants lime, silver or burgundy in colour.

Position & Soil

Prefers moist situations and can grow very well in dappled shade. Can tolerate most soils types including sandy loam and clay. Drought and frost tolerant.



[Mailing List](#)

Figure 2. More information page for *Acacia cognata* (Specialty Trees, Victoria, Australia with permission).

Specialty Trees website was easy to navigate with plenty of relevant information. There are a few really good websites like this, e.g., Flemings and Ozbreed. Websites like this require someone dedicated to looking after them. This is fine for larger business. Of course not all businesses are in a position to allocate someone full time to the task.

So how do the designers know about these websites? Search engine optimisation is important but not the only way. How would you let people know?

Down websites (HTTP Error 503: service is unavailable) are just plain annoying. I heard many complaints from designers that many websites they have tried to use to research plants crash or they are outdated and haven't been touched for years. If you are going to have a website, keep it up-to-date or don't have one.

Knowledgeable staff is valuable to your brand. They need to be able to communicate with customers, otherwise you are likely to lose the sale — and maybe the customer. Training gives staff a career path and enable career progression. Many people I spoke with said they felt frustrated when phoning some companies to ask about particular plants and

the person they spoke with was not able to help them because they didn't have enough knowledge.

One comment made to me was about career progression and perhaps providing staff with training and offering that person career progression with incentives or profit share on the sales they make could only benefit everyone. Poorly trained staff may lose customers and may also lose staff.

Other forms of communication

Other types of communication include: books, catalogues, e-blasts, newsletters, and fax outs. Some of the bigger companies have books such as Flemings and Ozbreed, to name a couple. E-blast is an "email blast", i.e., an email that you send to a mailing list or large group of people, who are usually known as your subscribers. They are often sent to hundreds or thousands of subscribers and are managed using email marketing software or web applications. When considering other forms of communication remember the following.

1. The KIS principle.

If your business is not at the stage where it can afford the big website or books then you can still market if you use the KIS principle: Keep it simple.

Do it from the office by sending out lists via e-mail (a fax machine can be annoying to business owners). However do it properly and be sure to send a full list with correct information and images. Availability is also important.

2. Regular lines — always available?

List the regular lines that you always have and send the list complete with specs and also mature size. Show off what you do best. Promote those plants you grow well — PLUS use an image if you have one! Use images from your nursery, from the field, or as last resort from other sources with permission. Images from your suppliers of seeds and plugs show how the plant will fit into the landscape. A picture tells a thousand words (Figure 3). Images tell and sell the story of plants. They can demonstrate and inspire their use. For example, does it grow in a pot or does it look good in a hanging basket?



Figure 3. A quick and simple image that tells all.

3. Subscribe to publications and attend plant shows.

Subscribe to publications for inspiration and ideas and speak directly to growers and colleagues to source materials. They attend landscape and garden shows. They would like to connect with more businesses who supply plants and materials. They want to have two way communications with growers and follow the trends. They find they see more products displayed at landscape and garden shows. They are still keen to discover more websites and collect journals and trade lists and connect with growers. Trade associations such as IPA (Interior Plantscape Association) want to connect with growers to develop a list of suppliers for their members. It is all about two way communication:

- Good quality plants are always required by IPA.
- Keeping up with trends and even predicting the next big trend!
- By connecting with suppliers they can work on new trends or create the next big trend. That would be inspiring.

A two-way communication would ensure they know what is available and growers would also know what they are seeking.

IPA is always looking for good suppliers of various plants and materials. They would like to hear from growers when new plants are available or when you have a plant that is suitable for indoor plantscaping. i.e., *Zamioculcas zamiifolia* (Zanzibar gem). This can be sent directly to the association who will then send out to their members via e-blast, newsletters, etc.

The same applies with container suppliers. According to IPA there are a lot of great looking containers but they are not all terribly practical, for example: really small containers or containers that are not made for standard sized grow pots. IPA wants to/needs to work with container suppliers to come up with the right goods.

Vertical/green walls are becoming the norm in both interior and exterior design. With vertical gardens becoming increasingly popular and they are likely to be around for some time. They require many plants as well as requiring replacement plants. A good plant supplier is valuable to designers. One that has a good range and know what will grow on such sites.

4. Magazine writings.

Articles and advertorials in magazines/publications are a fast and efficient way of getting your name out there, especially good for new plants. Hort Journal will be running a dedicated section annually for new plant introductions.

Growing opportunities

What other opportunities could there be through collaboration with other sectors of the industry?

1. Big events – G20 Brisbane.

Plants on display at garden shows provide inspiration. Not all the displayed plants are indoor plants such as the native *Anigozanthos* in the about display (Figure 4). This business searched Australia wide to supply plants for the G20. They were shipped across the country as the designer had enormous issues trying to source plants. Some plants died on arrival and he should have spoken with Teena Stanford from Darwin Plant Wholesalers! She is an expert on transport and logistics. Many plants were required for the G20 event. Two way communications helps when large quantities are required.



Figure 4. G20 Brisbane Australia 2014 showing *Anigozanthos*.

2. Medicinal plants and horticultural therapy.

Austin Health's, Royal Talbot Rehabilitation Centre, has well established healing gardens.

The Lancet, made reference to these early examples adding that "historical forces are now refiguring the role of gardens in modern medicine at a time when countries face the growing burden of chronic diseases."

3. Greening cities.

Becoming a preferred supplier with government contracts requires a good business manager that can build relationships via networking.

4. Film sets.

Jeremy Critchley from The Green Gallery in Sydney supplied plants for the film set for The Great Gatsby.

5. Wedding and bridal fairs.

Many weddings today use potted plants as decorations, table settings and gifts, particularly with the trend of farm style weddings. Having a stand at a bridal expo to show off your beautiful plants and obtain future business with displays from flowers to rustic pots for table settings and decorations. Plants can be a take home gift (bomboniere) as well as a decoration at weddings.

CONCLUSION

Hort Journal Australia connects with many sector based organistaions. Such groups include:

- Horticultural Therapists
- Botanic Gardens
- Landscape industry
- Interior Plantscape Association
- Nursery & Garden Industry
- Government – Councils/Educational Institutions
- International Plant Propagators' Society growers
- Retail garden centres

It has worked hard at bridging the gap to introduce people from various sectors of the industry. Botanic gardens, interior plantscaping and horticultural therapy are all now sectors of the industry represented in the magazine on a regular basis. We endeavour to make it easy for industry people when they think of plants HJA is the magazine to go to.

How can HJA help? It connects you with all sectors of the industry and is here to help you in your business. We would like your feedback regarding how to do this.

We are looking to build a website link that will enable designers or businesses that require plants in the future to be able to upload their desired list to the site and growers in return can look at the list to see if it is a line they are able to supply.

- What do you think about that?
- Can you offer other suggestions?

