

## Cultivating Success: My Journey into the Nursery Industry

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### Summary

Samantha shares her journey into the nursery industry, highlighting key strategies that have shaped Bamboo World Production Nursery to what it is today – working hard to create a business growth of over 250% income in 5 years. Her experiences span various industries and continents, offering insights that may resonate with you or spark new ideas.

Samantha's journey began in the Army, where she learned discipline, teamwork, resilience, and adaptability. After 11 years of service, she transitioned to roles in travel writing, public relations, and project management across Asia, working with brands like Motorola, Apple, and Ikea.

These experiences helped her excel in problem-solving and leadership roles in diverse environments.

In 2008, Samantha met her husband, Matt, who has extensive landscaping experience, in Macau. Matt's impressive projects include the Sydney Olympics and the world's biggest interior vertical garden at MGM Macau. In 2019, they moved back to Australia and took over Bamboo World, a 15-acre nursery in the picturesque Northern Rivers NSW.

Their key strategies include innovation, sustainability, community engagement, and adaptability. They updated operations with e-commerce platforms, automated processes, and online ordering. They prioritise sustainability by minimising their

environmental footprint and promoting conservation efforts. Community engagement and customer education are essential; they participate in events, host workshops, and offer personalised customer service. They also stay prepared for unexpected challenges, having navigated droughts,

## INTRODUCTION

Today, I have the privilege of not only talking about my story, but also delving into some key strategies I've learned over the years and applied to our nursery business. These insights stem from my experiences across industries and continents. I hope that what I share resonates with you or sparks new ideas for your own endeavours.

Before we begin, I want to clarify that I'm someone who can never sit still, always having too much on the go, and often saying 'yes' and then figuring it out along the way. Despite this, I managed to fit all that I'm about to tell you into my life - celebrating my 50th birthday last year.

### THE WINDING PATH THAT LED ME HERE

Straight out of school, I chose a career path that would profoundly shape my character and equip me with invaluable skills. Instead of a job lined up in a local resort as a receptionist, I joined the Army. Initially, it was a way to escape my small hometown of Port Douglas, but it became so much more. It was transformative and shaped me into who I am today. The Army taught me discipline, teamwork, resilience, and adaptability. I experienced fitness, travel, excitement, new friends, and of course - challenging times - all rich with learning and growth. In fact,

fires, a global pandemic, floods, storms, and more in just 5 years!

Samantha's journey has taught her resilience, innovation, and adaptability. As Bamboo World continues to grow, Samantha and Matt are committed to collaboration and industry progress.

you could almost say my first "horticultural" lesson was during training in the bush, learning to choose carefully the right leaf for toilet paper!

After 11 years of service, filled with both rewarding and tough experiences, I left the military to explore new horizons, starting in Singapore. Working as a travel writer and later as an assistant editor for a magazine, I eventually landed my dream job in public relations. At a boutique agency, I learned the power of words and the importance of understanding and speaking the customer's language. I then moved into client-facing roles in a project management company in Asia, at first handling project deliveries but then moving into large-scale retail rollouts, new business opportunities, and project crisis management. My military background equipped me to tackle challenges head-on and excel in problem-solving and leadership roles – and I could quite easily hold my own working in what was a very male-dominated environment.

Over my 17 years living in Asia, I travelled and worked across the region. I spent 5 years in Singapore, 2 years in Hong Kong, and the remainder in the Gambling Mecca of Asia: Macau. I gravitated towards projects needing transformation and growth. Whether it was resolving communication

breakdowns or managing complex installations, I thrived in roles demanding adaptability, clear communication, and strategic thinking. I worked with brands like Motorola, Apple, Tesco, Ikea, Levi's, and The Body Shop, gaining diverse and invaluable experience. Through these roles, I also gained insight into how different companies operate and developed a fascination with best practices, observing how some companies excelled at refining these over the years.

I also spent time giving back and contributing to any of the communities I lived in. I volunteered at shelters and helped with any mother nature crisis clean-ups in the communities – and also volunteered my time with local industry events such as the Construction Industry Lighthouse Club or the International Ladies Club of Macau – both of whom raised money and supported those in need. Because of my work, I was asked along to a blind business lunch, which in turn landed me this position: FAB at Lamborghini Global. As a member of Lamborghini's Female Advisory Board, my role was twofold: to raise the brand's profile among female audiences - and the super fun part - to conduct test drives of vehicles and give them my feedback over the dinner table on how to better expand their female market. As you can imagine, it was a horrible job (insert cheeky smile here).

Whilst in Macau fate led me to meet hubby Matt at a poolside party for expatriates. It seemed like a perfect match: he loved working with plants and had a wealth of experience in landscaping, while I admired flowers but had no clue how to keep a plant alive. Matt's apprenticeship in Australia had seen him work on impressive projects, including the Elephant enclosure at Sydney Taronga Zoo, the Sydney Olympics

in 2000, and then lead him to managing external works on one of the casinos in Macau. His mantra was to work himself out of a project on budget and in time - given that landscaping was often the final touch before a grand opening. From Crown to MGM, Wynn to Sands, St. Regis to Venetian, he had managed numerous projects, including iconic installations like the world's biggest interior vertical garden at MGM, as well as a very yummy 8m tall chocolate fountain. I can confirm the chocolate was real.

## **TRANSITIONING INTO THE NURSERY INDUSTRY**

Matt's background in landscaping, paired with my diverse experiences in project management and marketing, laid the groundwork for our foray into the nursery industry. When we decided to move back to Australia, we searched for a couple of years for a wholesale nursery that would afford us more time for our family. And there on a small private site, only 3kms from where Matt first started his landscape and tree farm apprenticeship, was this gorgeous 15-acre property - Bamboo World. I was instantly drawn to its location and the potential for growth. And so began the move.

BUT, in 2019 when we took the reins of our nursery business, I felt like I was stepping into a time machine after the quick-paced life of Macau. Our online presence barely existed, limited to a simple single-page website, while orders trickled in through traditional landline phone calls and faxes. No marketing. No events. No chasing business; they just waited for business to come to them. In their defence, they were in retirement wind-down mode and had been wanting to sell for over 2 years. We were their ticket to retirement, and they were our ticket to a new family life.

## GETTING INVOLVED IN THE NURSERY INDUSTRY

The handover left me wondering, is this the norm in the nursery industry? Is this the standard for how a nursery operates? It's not what my business plan had in mind. So I embarked on a quest for industry knowledge, seeking out connections with industry bodies and local organizations. Despite scepticism from the previous owners, I dove headfirst into the Nursery and Garden Industry NSW & ACT (NGINA), and was eventually offered a seat on its board as a director overseeing communications. Simultaneously, I immersed myself in our local NGINA Northern Rivers (NR) committee, driven by a desire to learn more and reconnect everyone in the area. A couple of us put our heads together and came up with the "Pulling back the shade cloth" sessions, which has quickly become a hit, offering a glimpse into the inner workings of local nurseries while fostering community and camaraderie over tea and cake. Similar to what you'll be seeing tomorrow on your outings.

### Worth the time?

While some may question the value of committee involvement, I view it as an investment in our business and the broader industry. As the saying goes, "A rising tide lifts all boats." I've always believed that serving on a committee within an industry body isn't just about titles or how much time out of your job it takes; it's about effecting change and driving progress. It's an opportunity to shape the industry's trajectory, forge connections with key players, and grow both personally and professionally. So, while the road may be challenging for someone not born with a green thumb, I'm committed to rolling up my sleeves and making a tangible

impact. And in terms of Elevating our Business – we've kept four key strategies top of mind the past few years. Not to mention the hard work Matt's done to maximise the space and resources, doubling the stock on the ground and expanding into other pot sizes and varieties.

## OUR 5-YEAR STRATEGY

As we navigate the ever-evolving nursery industry landscape, Bamboo World Production Nursery has embraced a forward-thinking approach centered on innovation, sustainability, community engagement, and adaptability.

### Innovation, Change, and Technology:

In today's dynamic digital landscape, embracing innovation, technology, and change is crucial for maintaining competitiveness and relevance in any business. We have prioritized updating and integrating technology into our operations and communications whenever feasible. This includes transitioning to user-friendly e-commerce platforms tailored for the nursery industry, like Evergreen Connect and , and implementing automated production processes and online ordering systems. Our goal is to enhance productivity while streamlining operations, essentially optimizing our processes.

Excitingly, we've also ventured into producing short informational videos featuring Matt, aimed at educating and enriching our audience's understanding of bamboo cultivation – across all our social media platforms. And be sure to keep an eye out for our upcoming feature on ABC Gardening Australia, where we are interviewed with Jerry Colby-Williams and share our insights and passion for educating on the

best practices for bamboo - a rewarding experience that will allow us to connect with a broader audience once it airs.

### **Sustainability and Environmental Stewardship:**

As stewards of the environment – you know because we grow things for a living, we should all prioritise sustainability in everything we do. But often we are so busy with day to day we can overlook this. From production practices to packaging materials, we try to stay committed to minimising our environmental footprint and promoting biodiversity and conservation efforts. I even now get to grow flowers in our nursery – and because it's called IPM, and good for our environment, it's allowed to stay! By investing in sustainable practices, not only are we doing our part to protect the planet, but as an industry we're also resonating with environmentally-conscious consumers who prioritise sustainability in their purchasing decisions.

### **Community Engagement, Customer Education, and Service:**

Engaging with our local community and fostering a culture of education and awareness is a priority in our business. We actively participate in community events, host workshops – such as the upcoming visit by the Wollongbar Garden Club and collaborate with schools and organisations to share our knowledge and expertise. We offer customers – a service of 'just call us if your customer needs selection help', we provide guides, selection suggestions and after planting help. Our mantra is that we want to make sure that the person has the right plant for the right spot and have often talked ourselves out of a sale. By engaging with our community and customers in meaningful

ways, we're not only building trust and loyalty but also helping to engage and educate, and hopefully along the way inspire the next generation to choose horticulture. And often if customers are looking for product and we don't have it, we help to recommend who might. As we believe that it's a great big industry that we can all share a slice of the pie.

### **Adaptability and Preparedness:**

In the nursery industry, as in any other industry, being prepared for unexpected challenges is essential for survival. Since taking over the business, we've had 2019 drought, 2020 fires, 2021 global pandemic, 2022 floods, 2023 storms and even a high voltage electrical lines fire on our property, and this year – well who knows – let's hope it's not recession as some are predicting. The key is we've learned from our own experiences and understand the importance of maintaining flexibility and preparedness. Whether it's navigating these natural disasters, economic downturns, cold winters, or a shift in consumer preferences because the sun isn't out, or the elections are happening, we're thought outside the box and looked at other ways to diversify the business and manage staffing levels to best weather the ups and downs. And in line with this, being a part of an industry body means that we have support when needed for getting coordinated briefings and assistance or information during hard times.

### **About Bamboo World Production Nursery**

Bamboo World Production Nursery (Bambooworld, 2024), established in the mid-1990s by Victor Cusack, is now proudly owned since 2019 by Matt and Sam Birkwood, who share a deep passion for bamboo and ensuring the right plant for the right

spot. In the late 1990s, Bamboo World played a significant role in establishing commercial bamboo plantations for the production of edible shoots and timber.

Today, Bamboo World is one of Australia's top three suppliers of quality non-invasive clumping bamboo to garden centres, retail nurseries, landscapers, and the general public. With over 100 varieties of clumping bamboo growing in optimum conditions on a 15-acre nursery, Bamboo World offers a wide range of sizes, from 140mm, 200mm and 300mm pots to 45L bags and larger. The plants are water-fed daily from their spring fed and recycled dam, ensuring their robust health and quality. Additionally, the nursery provides consignment growing for specific needs and quantities. Located within 10 minutes of the Pacific Highway in the picturesque Northern Rivers growing triangle, the nursery boasts excellent freight connections to Brisbane, Sydney, and Melbourne.

Matt brings over 30 years of experience in landscaping, tree farms and external projects to the business. Sam, with a background in the Australian Army and various Director and CEO roles overseas, also contributes her expertise. In her spare time, she serves as a firefighter with Fire + Rescue NSW Alstonville station and sits as a Director on the Board of Nursery & Garden Industry NSW & ACT (NGINA).

Bamboo World's key focus is on growing the industry through collaboration, education, and best practices. The nursery is committed to fostering awareness of bamboo tropical plants and supporting the industry's development. Join Bamboo World Production Nursery in cultivating a greener, more sustainable future.

## CONCLUSIONS

As I stand here today, I am so proud of how far we have come with the business. Our nursery is no longer confined to the limitations of the past but is flourishing in the ever-changing landscape of the 21st century. Our commitment has allowed us an increase in our income of over 250% from when we first took over. Of course, that also comes with increased expenses, but it's all headed in the right direction – moving from 'surviving' to 'thriving'.

My journey – from the army to communications, to construction to the nursery industry – has taught me invaluable lessons about resilience, innovation, and the transformative power of adaptation that has led me here today to have an exceptional range of tools in my toolbox to use – and share.

Each of us brings a unique set of skills and experiences to this industry, and it is through collaboration that we can share and grow together. As I'm sure you all have a great story of how you came to be here. And this week, I'd like you to ask the person sitting next to you what their story is that brought them to work in our industry. In closing, I am reminded of the quote, "Bloom where you are planted". Thank you for joining me on this journey and inviting me to be the opening speaker for the IPPS 2024 Ballina Conference. I look forward to showing you around our nursery tomorrow at the Nursery Tours where we'll show you firsthand how to tell the difference between a running and clumping bamboo, and talk through some propagation techniques.

## LITERATURE CITED

Bambooworld (2024) Available at: <https://bambooworld.com.au/>