

The Commercial Propagation and Production of Fuchsias at Tamborine Mountain

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I spent most of my young days at boarding school on the coast or on my father's sheep property in far South West Queensland, approximately 600 miles away, and then 20 odd years on another sheep property even further west. I came to Tamborine Mountain in 1976. Tamborine Mountain is about one hour's drive from Brisbane and about 20 min. from the major coastal highway which runs along the east coast of Australia. It is about 1800 ft above sea level, giving it a temperate climate in contrast to the subtropical climate of the coast and the arid conditions of my earlier life. I was offered a job in a production nursery on Tamborine Mountain and it wasn't long before I established my own small nursery on a third of an acre at the rear of my home. Three years later, when a well-drained and well-positioned 4.5 acre piece of land became available, the present nursery was established. By then, I had a clear picture of the ideas I wished to build into the new nursery and of the opportunities arising from the special climate of Tamborine Mountain and its geographical position in Australia. Together, these led me to specialize in fuchsias.

The components were:

- To endeavor to keep any development simple and flexible
- To grow out in the open in full winter sun using natural light levels to produce a short internodal plant with a cosmetic bloom.
- To keep capital costs to a minimum.
- Not to let any other crop interfere with *Fuchsia* production -use the same growing medium for other crops or don't grow them.
- Take advantage of the autumn, winter and early spring markets which are traditionally short of colour.
- Produce a plant that was also potted colour rather than just a shrub in flower.

I do not breed fuchsias; instead, I conduct a 3-year cycle of testing fuchsia cultivars (there are more than 10,000 registered cultivars and many more unregistered ones worldwide). Apart from beautiful flower colours and forms, I look for the cultivars that will flower in our mild winter conditions, are naturally self-branching, are easy to pack in cartons for shipping, and are not brittle to handle. Some cultivars are incredibly reactive to ethylene and will defoliate completely after three days in a carton on a truck. Other cultivars may lose all their flowers and buds. Right from the start of the nursery, the product name, "The Tamborine Selection", was registered for my fuchsias and the number of cultivars is kept in this "selection" to between 20 and 30. It includes a good cross-section of colour and form, both single and double, bold and soft colour combinations. Successful cultivars in the selection trials have to be better than the ones in "The Tamborine Selection". In effect, a newly selected cultivar displaces one in the "selection". Importantly, apart from

many other attributes, all cultivars in "The Tamborine Selection" must still be in good condition after 3 days in a carton in a truck

The propagation area was designed for flexibility and multiple use and is also a growing area. Most of the striking of cuttings is done in a 50% shade-covered section and then the shade cloth is rolled off to harden the tubed plants. Most of the 100,000 cuttings are put down in January and February each year for the main wholesale markets. In late March these plants are transplanted to pots and placed in the open field sections, and by May-June (that is, mid-winter) these plants are ready for sale. The field area is divided into ten blocks, protected from strong winds by 6-ft-high shade-cloth fences. These blocks are watered by overhead sprinklers and these sprinklers are also activated by frost and heat sensors. I accompanied the development of the production side of my nursery with a great deal of attention to promotion of fuchsias. This I did by writing regularly about my product for monthly magazines and in newspapers, and by educating my customers—the retailers and garden centres—with good information on how to keep fuchsias looking good in their holding and display sections with a "Care Sheet" and another "Care Sheet" to hand to their customers. My original plan of defining my market, of keeping things simple and of having low capital expenditure worked very well, however, it also meant that I employed people for only half a year. The problem with this strategy was that I was not able to keep good staff. I was at the mercy of the elements—a hail storm or a cyclone had the potential to wipe out my income for the year. So I have now diversified by growing other flowering perennials so as to be less dependent on one crop, and I now have a successful garden centre called "The Fuchsia Farm". Mailorders are also despatched weekly from April to September throughout Australia. The advertising for these brings many customers, both wholesale and retail, to the nursery itself.