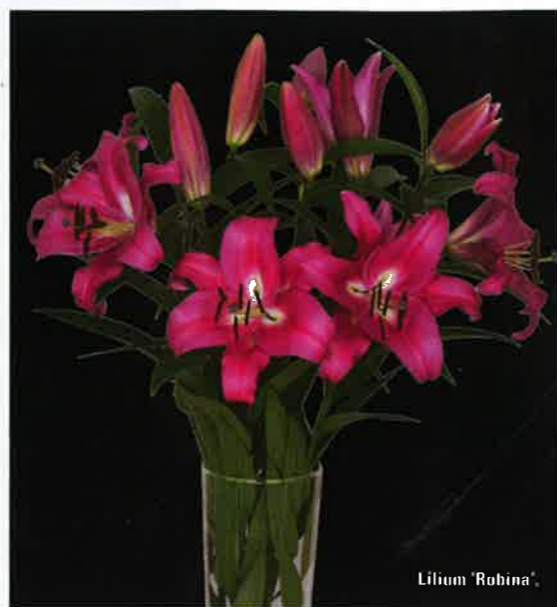




Lilium 'Pink Palace'



Lilium 'Robina'



Lilium 'Santander'



Lilium 'Gerez'



Lilium 'Firebolt'

A move two and a half years ago to the current 4ha site established Feingold Flowergrowers P/L as one of the largest lily growers in Australia.

Down Under on the up with lilies

John Feingold has been involved with flowers since he sold them at a roadside stall which he set up to make extra pocket money as a University student. John bought his flowers from growers around his home, and naively thought that growing them was easy. So, after travelling abroad for many years, he started his own flower growing business, initially field-grown outdoor crops. Eleven years ago he started growing lilies, and moved to the current site two years ago: a move which saw an expansion of the business by 30% to the current 4ha area under glass. The site was originally planted to roses, and many of the systems, including irrigation, needed replacing or adapting for lily production. Additional infrastructure, such as large cold-storage chambers were also required to be installed.

by Audrey Gerber

Good people are still needed

Despite many mechanised processes good people are still needed. John and his young production manager, Craig Ellis, work well together, with complementary wisdom, experience and enthusiasm, and a shared sound work ethic. "We work hard and sometimes need to be tough for the business to succeed", says John, smiling, "yet a happy work environment is just as important." Many processes have been mechanised and John and Craig are constantly on the lookout for further increases in efficiency. "Labour is hard to find", worries John, "we have twelve to fourteen permanent staff and about the same number of casual staff." A move to a greater proportion of permanent staff is the ideal, yet finding trained employees or training on site is proving difficult.

"Although the tasks are not physically demanding, they do require precision and attention, and yet are very repetitive", explains Craig. He gives the example of picking lilies, "The stage of flower maturity is critical; the stem must be cut close to the ground or the robotic system of stacking used crates falters; the stem needs to be carefully lifted through the supporting mesh without damaging flower, stem or leaves." Harvested flowers are placed on an overhead conveyor system which transports them to the packing facility. The right combination of trained staff and mechanised processes is a goal toward which the business still strives.

Choice of varieties

Eleven years of experience with lilies has given Craig Ellis confidence as production manager. "We learn a lot from Dutch producers," he



John Feingold (right) and his manager, Craig Ellis, have a shared philosophy of supporting a happy work environment.

confides, "yet our Australian conditions are quite different and we do need to adapt". Hot summers are of particular concern requiring experienced selection of varieties. Currently fourteen to eighteen varieties are in production. While continuing to keep an eye on new varieties and market preferences. Managing director, John would prefer to reduce the number of varieties by half. Bulbs are imported from the Netherlands, Chile and New Zealand.

Year round flower production requires a reliable supply of fresh bulbs. Purchasing from the southern hemisphere provides fresh bulbs when the Netherlands can only supply bulbs which have already been stored for many months. The choice of supplier is made based on the quality of bulbs offered, with relationships also being of high importance. A greater choice of varieties is available through working with a number of suppliers. Van den Bos, a Dutch company

which has recently set up offices in Melbourne, is one of the suppliers to Feingold Flowers.

Pre ordering

Although actual growth and flower production is rapid (approximately 13 weeks from planting to harvesting), decisions are made on which varieties to grow almost two years ahead. An annual volume of 10 million bulbs are ordered a year before delivery. Storage facilities on site are sufficient for 6-8 months worth of production, bulbs being removed from cold storage weekly for thawing, pre-chilling and planting. Generally a high percentage of bulbs produce saleable flowers – 6 bulbs on average are used to produce a 5 stem bunch.

Quarantine challenges

Quarantine regulations add an extra layer of complexity to lily production in Australia. Australian Quarantine Inspection Service (AQIS) require that bulbs are fumigated with Methyl bromide on arrival in Australia. In addition, the production site must be a registered quarantine area which is routinely inspected by AQIS. Plants are checked during all stages of growth, and clearance by AQIS must be obtained before flowers may be offered for sale. Spent bulbs >>>