



“I told you so” s have been coming thick and fast with the recent collapse of some of the massive M.I.S’s (managed investment schemes). They gave investors substantial tax incentives to get into what were initially timber plantations throughout Australia, though lost favour with existing farmers when they expanded into horticultural crops in a big way, with scant regard for existing supply and demand forces, in crops such as mangoes. Our local “level playing field” has already seen foreign corporate giants Chiquita and Dole muscling in on the Aussie banana industry, and the 21.4 million who eat the fruit (and dictate the market size).

The latest challenge to add an extra furrow to the brows of local banana growers is the import threat. However the extensive protocols required for bananas to be imported and the strength and resolve of our local growers should keep the production of Australia’s most eaten fruit, here for a long time to come.

As a farming district Mission Beach and the close hinterland have some very strong and uncommon assets. The red basalt soil type (kraznozem) found in the Clump Point region is rated the best type in the world where natural fertility and good drainage are important. The next best soil type here is red/brown metamorphic, derived from greywacke parent rock. Greywacke is formed from sediments (in our case volcanic ash) which settled in ancient sea beds and formed haphazard sandstone like rock which has since been uplifted to form most of the elevated land from Luggar Bay to the Walter Hill Range between El Arish and Tully.

In contrast, Mount Mackay and the islands are less fertile granite country. The Mission Beach area has advantages over farmlands north and south in more ways than just good soils and rainfall. The cold air which slips east from the high tablelands at night, doesn’t seem to pull winter temperatures as low in our region as some places further north, so minimum temperature is less of a restriction with crop choice and risk factor.

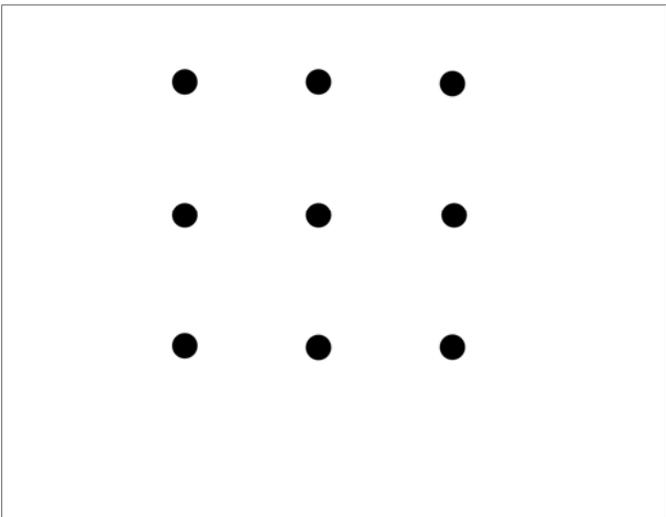
I believe the natural environment has a lot to do with shaping the character of the people who live and work there. The vibrant, rich diversity of the Mission Beach environment has infused its people with resilience and an often adventurous business spirit. Anyone who needs more than 10 seconds to think of local characters endowed with “coastal crafty/ jungle mongrel” attributes, could broaden their social networks.

One such character once told me of the major difficulty he had getting Tully banks and machinery dealers to take him seriously about the purchase of a new tractor. That was in the early days when almost all of our Nations’ banana needs were grown in Southern Qld and Northern NSW, and bananas were basically a backyard crop up here.

If you were a serious farmer then - you grew cane. The good advice that grower gave me at the time was “when everyone else is stepping left, you step right, and when they all start heading right, you go left”.

Though “not as young as he used to be” that same grower is still there , in fine form, with admirable succession processes in place for the next generation to continue, when he and his wife reckon they’ve had enough. What he was saying made plenty of business sense, when there’s a lot of good competitors in something you can expect to work much harder for any margins.

The attached problem (below) is a classic I reckon, for showing that we can work really hard at things and not get a result. We very often just need to break our trained, habitual thinking patterns to find the key that makes all the difference. Just link all the nine dots (below) using 4 straight lines connected at their ends. The lines can cross each other.



The solution will be in the next bulletin.

The Mission Beach mind set for rural land has been fairly fixed for a few decades.....cattle and or bananas then subdivide, so once productive paddocks are lost forever to masonry blocks and golden cane palms.

Whilst planners have recognized the value of good quality agricultural land to our community, I believe they still lack vision on viable block size for tropical horticulture. Banana farming is still used as a bench mark for local horticulture, with good reason as that is currently the major horticulture player.

A century ago the Cutten boys pioneered growing coffee and tea at Bingil Bay. Both have now “come of age” as major crops and tourism drawcards on the Tablelands where the growing environment is slightly more suitable.

Mission Beach has the perfect microclimate for growing most of the world’s tropical and ultra tropical delicacies, with everything from vanilla to uvilla worthy of commercial scrutiny. I believe the rural potential diversity first tried and tested by the early pioneers will be thoroughly revisited in the coming decades. Eddie Banfield planted one of only 3 purple mangosteen trees (Queen of the tropical fruits) growing in Australia in the early 80s, on Dunk Island. It well and truly out lived him (they produce

was unfortunately bulldozed for the golf course before its value over turf was realized. It could have been producing 500kg plus of the brilliant fruit today, and been a rare and living part of our early horticultural history if the developers of the time had a bit more knowledge and vision. And yes, it would have survived nature's challenges from the recent cyclones.

Times have changed though and Brighton's farm for example at East Feluga now has around 1000 mangos-teen trees in the ground and plenty of other local growers have smaller commercial plantings.

The early horticultural pioneers in the north would have probably overlooked trialing crops like durian due to its very rich taste and aroma, described as "smelling like hell – tasting like heaven". Until fairly recent times the average Australians' taste buds were only accustomed to relatively bland fare and the likes of olive oil, garlic and pizza fell well and truly into the "wog tucker" category, though now they are virtually staples as we crave richer, fuller flavours.

The controversial durian (tagged King of fruits) is definitely on its own as a rich flavoursome fruit. Apparently tigers and elephants fight over it in the wild Asian rainforests where it originates. The smell of the ripe fruit is to encourage/help wildlife locate and eat the fruit and therefore disperse the large seeds. Durian is gaining popularity in Australia as more people get to try good varieties. The frozen durians in the chain stores are good varieties from Thailand – though through the freezing process, which allows the fruit to meet import quarantine protocols, and subsequent de-frosting by the chain stores, means

they're normally of extremely poor eating quality.

Fresh Australian durian easily fetches between \$10 and \$20/ kg wholesale in Southern markets, and the Mission Beach area is perfect for growing it.

This area may well have a reprieve (thanks to the 2025/31 plan) from heading down the same path as Tweed Heads, Coffs Harbour and others, where the

majority of good farming land has been lost to urban sprawl, reducing its critical mass advantages as a production region. Local planners will predictably be lobbied with the "too many neighbours, too small to be viable and not enough water" arguments from landholders who see subdivision as the best option for them to make a dollar and cash in farmland. This area has plenty of potential for horticulture outside of the cane, cattle and banana "square," which would maintain our economic base and district character better than the short term

gains from slicing up good productive country, which inevitably means more traffic, crowded boat ramps and increased pressure on our local recreation fishery. Simple things highly valued by many locals and visitors alike.

The collapse of the likes of Storm Financial and the giant rural managed investment schemes Timbercorp and Great Southern, has, if nothing else, reinforced the belief of a lot of the people living in this area, that the dollar doesn't always rule, and bigger isn't always better.

Peter Salleras, Rural/Ag.



Harry Linnett with a big 10 kilo durian grown at East Feluga.



Abiu harvested just two years after planting