



GROWING SEASON GALORE!

The winter chills and short days are behind us for another six or seven months. The first hint of *croc's*, 30 degree days and cyclones coming out of hibernation, has seen our southern friends scampering back to the tamer side of the Tropic of Capricorn until next year. For locals who take the good with the bad and know our area, this is the good season.

The sea and reef conditions are more likely to be better for those who like to fish or frolic. The *tradies* get pressured because everyone wants everything done by the Christmas deadline, yet the building summer silly season gives us all the opportunity to hone our appreciation of an icy social sip after a hard day's *yakka* – a timeless tropical treat.

The warmer weather triggers the vibrant Mission Beach area ecosystems wild and rural. This is the start of the growth season when most of the rural production foundations are set. Pastures and cane spring up and bananas can push out a new leaf every week building strong plants to hold heavy bunches. Rambutan, mangosteen, durian, guanabana, sapodilla and breadfruit (to name a few), flower to build their wet season crop, showing the first promise of significant yield since Cyclone Larry's lashing.

The developing summer/wet season ushers in rural bounty and threat as one. Some "armchair experts" reckon Larry meant we'd probably have another 20 years at least before the next big one. They probably said that in the US after Katrina wrecked New Orleans and look at the pattern there only 3 years on. The Mission Beach area is generally spared from damaging storms, hail and bushfires but cyclones have hammered horticulture here since the Cutten brothers started farming in Bingil Bay in



the early 20th century. In a couple of hours on the 20th of March 2006, Larry reminded growers that we are sometimes small fry in what mother nature can throw at us. Tree fruit crops were hit particularly hard with most carrying a heavy fruit loading at early harvest, ending up like fruit salad and fiddlesticks.

The quest by some local tree fruits growers to cyclone proof will probably result in Larry's visit being remembered as a blessing rather than a curse. The traditional style of growing tropical tree fruits with "dinosaur" (southern growers' tag) canopy management means the "lollypop on a stick" tree profile is asking for trouble in big winds. Trellised canopy management systems have been developed and refined in temperate tree crops for

many years but failed to make inroads into tropical orchard management. This is possibly due to the misconception that tropical tree crops have year-round canopy growth and therefore excessive vigour. Our trees have a similar dormancy period to temperate fruits, just no leaf drop. There are many trellis styles possible with the basic principle being the same. Structural branches are trained on wires and poles for best fruiting and management efficiencies, which produces lower, supported fruiting canopies earlier, which are far less prone to a good blow than the "dinosaur" trees.

A less dramatic threat than cyclones (though just as hard



on the hip pocket) for tree fruit growers, is a growing craving for these new fruits by native and feral wildlife. Unmanaged commercial and backyard fruit trees have understandably "trained" wild fruit eaters to accept our introduced fruits as "bush tucker" and become a bigger pest than ever for growers. Intensive trellis production systems allow high production per netted square metre and are therefore more cost effective. Fruit-eating wildlife that is scarce because it's prized protein in most production areas of the tropical world, are very abundant here. Mesh size to keep birds and bats off crops also reduces sunburn on susceptible fruit types, but the ultimate, I believe, is fruit fly netting. This excludes most insect and vertebrate pests at the crucial parts of the crop cycle and according to trials in southern Queensland, has major microclimate benefits with higher humidity, warmer night temperatures, cooler day temperatures and diffused light benefiting growth, sweetness and fruit colour. Properly designed and constructed net systems are claimed to be able to withstand 200/kph winds.

The fruit growing orchard systems Larry wrecked were almost identical to what the Cutten brothers had so long ago. Growing the world's best available selections of tropical fruits here will always draw wildlife away from bland and sour bush choices like Blue Quandong and Davidson's Plum (to name the best) and none of us can predict what the vagaries of climate change will fling at us. However, we can work a lot smarter with the available options and opportunities. I have no knowledge of tropical fruit growers adapting and trialing latest 21st century cultural practices other than in the Mission Beach area. I will predict with total confidence that this will be another case where an old saying comes to fruition – "The future belongs to those who see it first."