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Limes with a Twist

Jock
Douglas has
big plans
for his
diminutive
fruit

_by Louisa Cass

As 2005 drew to a close, Queenslanders sweltered under some of the hottest temperatures in recent memory. In the south-west near Roma, on Jock Douglas's grazing property, only one thing wasn't wilting in the sun – his native desert lime bushes.

It's a fascinating story of survival in a harsh landscape. The native trees can be found over a wide area and have adapted to the conditions – including foraging kangaroos. Vicious spikes grow on the trees to the height of a mature kangaroo, even branches that bend from above grazing height thrust needles at their predators.

It was the great taste which really sold Jock on farming the limes commercially. The limes are about the size of a large chickpea and can be eaten whole, bursting forth an intense, piquant juice rich in vitamin C. For generations his family picked limes from trees clumped in shady groves around the region, making refreshing drinks, sauces, pickles and jams.

Then Jock and his wife Mina started selecting the best trees for grafting while harvesting the wild fruit.

"We were producing jams and chutneys in our farm kitchen, but as soon as we got an order from the UK we knew we had to make sure the products had good shelf life and were produced properly".

And so, with another family-run company, The Bramble Patch at Stanthorpe, taking over manufacturing, Australian Desert Limes began to really take off.

With hand picking the preferred method of harvest, the regional community swells the core workforce at peak periods. Australian Desert Limes has also developed a program to train local indigenous Nalingu people in all facets of desert lime production. Two have recently completed a TAFE horticulture course and, with support from the Douglas family, are helping the Nalingu plan a planting of desert limes and native grasses on local irrigated land.



Jock's also encouraging other farmers to produce the limes commercially, particularly as viable native stands decline.

"People simply don't know about the desert limes, so we need more innovative people growing them, and we need good commercial returns for them to encourage them to develop new products", he enthuses.

Jock is committed to soil and land conservation. In 1997 he received the Order of Australia for service to

primary industry and conservation. A founder of the Landcare movement, Jock is now chair of Australian Landcare Management System, an initiative to help landowners improve natural resource management and get recognised for it. He believes the system, based on International Standard 14001, will also support Australia's reputation. "There are lots of claims about being clean and green, but there's nothing underpinning it. We also need to win back urban people and show what we are doing for our environment".

