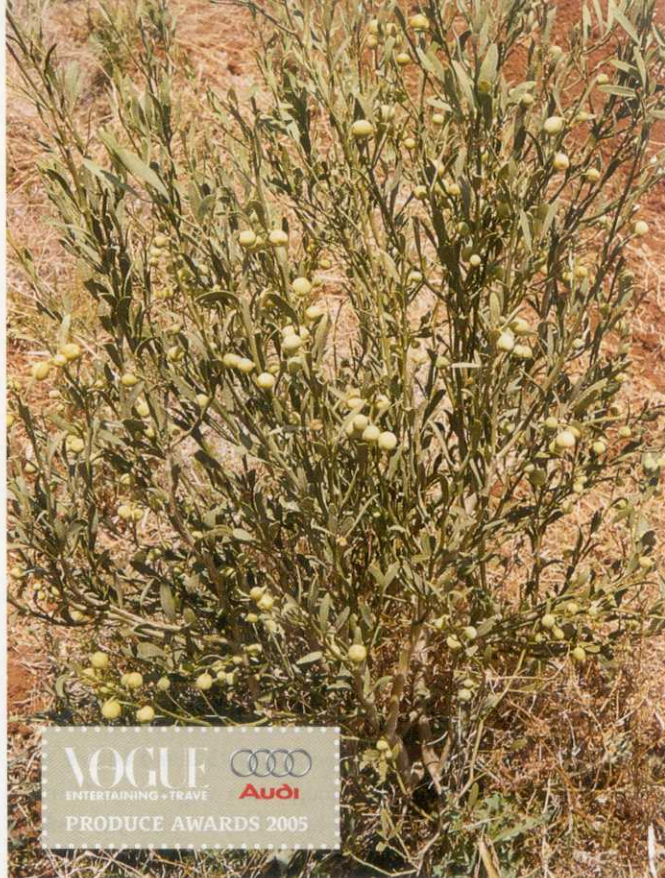


WILD AT HEART DESERT LIMES

In a former grazing frontier-land, a juicy crop with a piquant tang redolent of the Australian bush is under cultivation **Words Margaret Alcock**

AMONG THE INDIGENOUS trees scattered across the rejuvenated downs of Wyoming – a grazing property in the Roma district of south-west Queensland – are stands of the native citrus *eremocitrus glauca*, or desert lime. The tiny green fruits of this tree – very high in vitamin C – ripen to a pale yellow in November. Part of the Aborigines' diet, desert limes have been used by outback settlers for generations to make cordials and preserves. The thin-skinned fruit is surprisingly thirst-quenching and, when eaten whole, offers an explosion of juice and a lingering flavour of lime and lemon with piquant overtones reminiscent of the Australian bush.

Jock Douglas and his wife Mina had been harvesting these limes from their wild trees for years, but found that supply was irregular, particularly during droughts. With advice from the CSIRO they learnt how to graft cuttings onto a Chinese citrus rootstock, initially selecting trees from the wild that consistently produced the best fruits. In the wild, the trees carry vicious-looking spikes (local legend has it that in the 1930s, these spikes were used to replace worn-out gramophone needles). However, the spikes only appear on the trees up to the height of a large kangaroo – beyond this level, the plant has no need of protecting its leaves from predators. Consequently, cuttings for grafting are taken from the upper limbs to avoid the dangers of spikes during the harvest.



Douglas, now chairman of the board of the Australian Landcare Management System, has spent a lifetime as a pastoralist in the cattle industry. In 1986, concerned about land degradation in New South Wales and Queensland, he began lobbying politicians for a national movement for sustainability and biodiversity. The same year, with a Landcare group, he retraced Surveyor General Sir Thomas Mitchell's 1846 expedition to the top of the Roma district's Mount Abundance, to observe changes to the adjacent grasslands. In 1996 he was awarded the McKell Medal for his 'outstanding contribution to soil and land conservation', and in 1997 also received the Order of Australia.

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When Douglas bought Wyoming 30 years ago, it had been degraded by farming and overgrazing. By resting the land and allowing native grasses to re-seed, he has returned most of the property to grazing, and only stocks cattle intermittently. Today he also has 3500 cultivated desert lime trees producing fruit and a further 6000 grafted trees in a nursery under shadecloth. These were selected from second-generation trees bearing the best fruit. When necessary, the trees are drip-irrigated from a dam. Douglas plans to plant native grasses in the five-metre space between the rows and, when the trees are tall enough, to graze goats or sheep. The family company Australian Desert Limes now sells cordial, jam, chutney, glace fruits, lime and orange marmalade, lime and tomato jam and frozen fruits. With orders from as far away as the UK, his nursery may soon have to expand.

Australian Desert Limes, (07) 4626 8100; www.australiandesertlimes.com.au.

TOP, cultivated desert lime tree. **LEFT, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT**, refreshing Australian desert lime cordial. Jock Douglas checking limes pre-harvest. Tangy desert lime jam. A desert lime tree in the wild.

