



## UNIQUE MARKET TAKES SUSTAINABLE STEMS TO EUROPE AND BEYOND

**The harsh and rocky terrain that sees native scrub flourish south of Sarina might seem a far cry from the romance of a bouquet of flowers in Europe.**

But a unique market for the blades of the well-known *Xanthorrhoea* (more commonly known as grass trees) sees thousands of stems exported annually from the Mackay region to exotic locations around the world.

From China to New York and Paris, our native stems are in demand by florists for their texture and longevity. Blades of Australian greenery are used in floral arrangements across continents.

“The foliage harvested by landholders in the Sarina and Koumala area goes primarily to Europe and North America, where we market it as ‘Steel Grass’ because of its strength and ability to hold its shape,” says Andy Driscoll. “It’s very popular because it has a shelf life of up to 6 weeks and provides a hardy green leaf that can be used in the winter of the northern hemisphere.”

Andy is the area manager for Cedar Hills Flowers & Foilage, who have been exporting products from Australia to the global floral industry for more than twenty years.

He says *Xanthorrhoea* is the perfect example of an almost truly sustainable crop – a native plant that is abundant in certain regions of Queensland that grows on its own terms, with no inputs required.

“It’s incredibly light as far as environmental impact goes, it is absolutely sustainable,” Andy says.

“*Xanthorrhoea* grows completely naturally and on top of that, it is quite a stringent process in terms of getting a license to harvest Australian native cut foliage. It is done with regular evaluation to monitor ecological impact and under strict government guidelines.”

Sarina landholders Angela and Ross Bailey have been hand harvesting *Xanthorrhoea* on their property and supplying direct to Cedar Hills for the last eight years.



They agree grass trees provide a uniquely sustainable market – not least because each tree will last for decades, thriving in its natural environment and regenerated by fire as it would have done pre-settlement.

“We also run cattle, but the grass tree plants we harvest from are just what was originally here, growing wild in the roughest and rockiest conditions on the property,” Angela says.

“They aren’t a crop as such, and it is the opposite of intensive farming – unlike something like cane, there is no need to plant, water or fertilise. Grass trees just happen to love the soil here and we work with what is naturally in abundance.”

The Baileys are currently the only landholders in the region who cut their own grass tree blades by hand. Cedar Hills contract staff to cut on other properties, but the ability to find and retain reliable staff in remote areas is difficult.

Cutting is certainly no easy task.

“When we harvest we’ll do up to five hours at a time and it’s pretty rough and rugged because of the conditions grass trees grow in, which is almost always on rocky hills,” Angela says.

“When you cut the plant, you always leave the heart and you take the stems from around the centre, leaving it to grow again. We use a sickle to cut it by hand, then sort and bundle it and move on to the next one – it’s pretty good exercise!”

Grass trees are a true part of the Australian native landscape and love fire. Reef Catchments is currently working with the Baileys to create a fire management plan tailored to their property.

“Flowering in the wild occurs after fire and in the absence of fire, xanthorrhoea will flower only when the season is good. Controlled use of fire can help the plant flower and provides a natural means of rejuvenating both plant and landscape health, in line with Australian ecological processes,” says Reef Catchments project officer, Kerensa McCallie.

“The plan will utilise the Clarke Connors Range Fire Management Guidelines to develop optimal fire regimes based on the three pillars of hazard reduction, primary production and biodiversity management.”

The Baileys are also eligible for Australian Government Reef Programme funding available through Reef Catchments.



Reef Catchments project officer, Iona Flett, said this would allow them to undertake a range of land management activities, including the installation of fencing and watering points.

“Ross and Angela have applied for incentives under the Rocky Dam Creek System Repair Project, and the Grazing Water Quality Grants Programme,” she said.

“This funding from the Australian Government allows landholders to improve their farm management practices for a double benefit – improved land productivity and reduced impact on the waterways that lead to the Great Barrier Reef.”

- **For more information on Cedar Hills Flowers & Foilage contact:**  
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**PICTURED:** Sarina landholders Ross and Angela Bailey are making the most of a unique market for the blades of Xanthorrhoea.