



CONCEPT PAPER

Small crop farming and niche produce

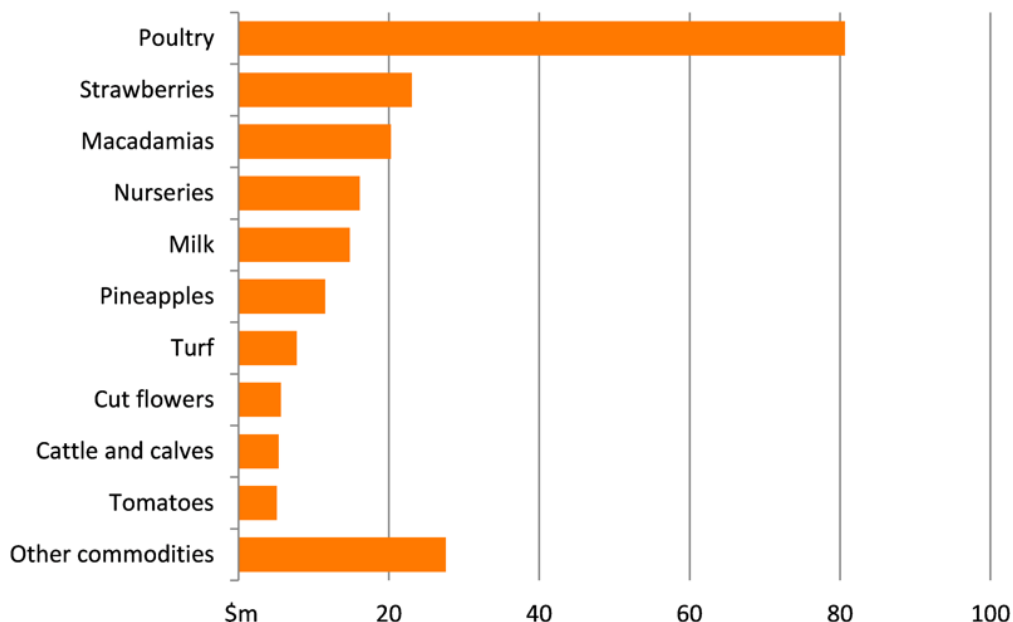
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Introduction

The Sunshine Coast region has a diverse agricultural sector. In 2016-17, the gross value* for agricultural production on the Sunshine Coast was \$218 million and was two percent of the total gross value for agricultural production in Queensland. The main commodity was poultry (\$81 million) followed by strawberries (\$23 million) and macadamias (\$20 million). These commodities together contributed to 57 percent of the total agricultural value for the region (see **Figure 1**).

As part of the Noosa Rural Enterprise Plan, this information paper aims to inform on Small Crop Farming and high value 'niche' produce for existing or potential new landowners in the Noosa Shire hinterland.

Figure 1. Value of Agricultural Production for the Sunshine Coast Financial Year 2016-17.



Note: The graph shows only data published by the ABS. Some values were not published by the ABS to ensure confidentiality. The 'Other commodities' category includes the total value of commodities not published as well as those with small values. Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, cat. no. 7503.0, Value of agricultural commodities produced, 2016-17 * The gross value estimates in this publication are derived by the multiplication of price and quantity estimates of agricultural commodities.

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Cat. no. 7503.0, Value of agricultural commodities produced 2016-17.

Species and varieties that grow in the region

The Noosa Shire Hinterland has a sub-tropical climate, rich soils, and a clean water supply, which are all conducive factors for crop growing. Table 1 provides a list of vegetables, fruit, and nuts grown in the region.

Table 1. List of vegetables, fruit, and nuts

Vegetables	Fruit & Nuts
Asian Vegetables	Avocadoes
Brassicas (Broccoli, Brussel Sprout, Cauliflower, Radish)	Citrus (Lemon, Lime, Mandarin)
Beans	Custard Apples
Beetroot	Fingerlime
Capsicum	Lychees
Chilli	Mangoes
Ginger	Macadamias
Garlic	Nectarines
Melon (Rock Melon, Honeydew, Watermelon)	Strawberries
Mushrooms	Passionfruit
Peas	Papaya
Potatoes	Persimmon
Pumpkin	Peaches
Sweet potato	Pineapples
Sweet corn	Coffee
Spinach	
Tomatoes	
Turmeric	

Due to the sub-tropical climate experienced in the Noosa Shire Hinterland, the growing year can be split into dry season during winter and wet season during summer.

Some of the vegetables and fruit that peak during the winter months are strawberries, kale, peas, herbs, potatoes, garlic, pumpkin, and coffee. Some of the vegetables and fruit that peak mainly in the summer season are beans, ginger, lychees, melon, pumpkin, sweet potato, sweet corn, mangoes, citrus, and persimmons.

Opportunities and constraints

To be a successful vegetable and fruit grower, basic factors such as soil suitability, irrigation availability, and the effect of temperature on growth, production, and quality need to be understood. The first crucial step when starting to grow small crops is to carry out a comprehensive soil test. Knowing the soil type can help with choice of crop and knowing how to optimise the plant growing conditions.

Growers who wish to grow for specific niche markets can succeed through planning and consideration of all the risks associated with production and marketing. It is important to speak to others in the industry. These connections can be made through contacting industry associations. Industry associations arrange seminars, networking opportunities, and workshops where you can meet others and create new business opportunities. Industry associations also hold training and education events and provide you with critical information about your industry (for example legislation information). A number of key industry associations are listed in the Further information section.

New opportunities

Some of the new market opportunities for the small crop farming are:

- Organic grown produce or chemical free produce. In Australia, organic certification can be carried out by certifying organisations that are accredited by the Department of Agriculture and Water Resources (Contact information for the approved certifying bodies are listed in Further information section).
- Asian vegetables for green grocers and supply to local restaurants
- Micro greens and edible flowers
- Herbs, including culinary, medicinal, fresh and dried
- Australian bush foods such as finger lime, lemon myrtle, quandongs, and wattle seed
- Farm Tourism, where farms are open to visitors for farm tours and fresh produce can be sold at farm gate shops

Constraints

Climatic factors such as rainfall, temperatures (low and high) and length of season can be major limitations for growers. Small land size can also be viewed as a constraint for growing crops. Both case studies presented in this concept paper are excellent showcases of successful cultivation from small areas of land in the Noosa hinterland.

Labour can also be a constraint for growers, with some crops requiring higher labour requirements than others throughout the growing season and during harvesting. For example, the harvesting and re-seeding of most greens and edible flowers is often a delicate process requiring intensive time and labour.

Options such as labour sharing and equipment sharing with others can help lessen these burdens.

Processing, marketing, and distribution challenges

Processing, marketing, and distribution can be major issues for growers. There may be difficulties with maintaining quality of produce with goods being highly perishable. Distribution may be difficult due to fuel costs and time constraints.

For small crop growers, understanding your local market is crucial. Weekends on the Sunshine Coast see many local markets selling fresh fruit and vegetables. Some of the main markets are Noosa Farmer Markets, Dagon Station Growers Market, Yandina Markets, Hinterland Harvest Markets, Woombye markets, Kawana Waters Artisans and Farmers Markets, Kin Kin farmers market, and Peregian Beach farmers market.

Co-operatives and food networks can help growers facing processing, marketing, and distribution issues. The Mary Valley Country Harvest Co-operative is a community-operated organisation that assists growers and producers in the Mary Valley region. The co-operative assists growers in marketing and distribution. Produce is available online and businesses and customers are serviced throughout the Mary Valley, Noosa, and wider Sunshine Coast region. For further information please see Country Noosa Concept Paper: Marketing & Distribution for a Case Study of Mary Valley Country Harvest Co-operative.

The Food and Agriculture Network (FAN) is the food and agribusiness network for the Sunshine Coast region including Noosa, Gympie, and Moreton Bay. Members of FAN span the entire industry supply chain. FAN is a conduit for collaboration, communication and co-operation, promoting knowledge sharing in the industry.

Sunfresh Marketing Co-operative is an avocado and selected tropical fruit marketing co-operative based on the Sunshine Coast. The co-operative first formed in 1995 by 22 local producers. It has since thrived and has now more than 175 members. The members include growers of avocados, lemon, lime, finger limes, custard apples, apples, peaches, persimmons, mangoes, and lychees. Sunfresh has developed thriving domestic and export businesses. Sunfresh not only helps with marketing produce but also has a packing facility in Coolumb.

Case study: Banyan View farm

At **Banyan View Farm** located in the Upper Pinbareen Creek catchment, Nina Saxton grows market garden vegetables on a small section of her 26-hectare farm, with the majority being dedicated to beef cattle.

In 2011 Nina moved to the area from Brisbane and in 2013 she set about following her passion for growing market garden vegetables. Nina farms holistically and grows vegetables using organic and biodynamic techniques. She describes the early days as a steep learning curve which involved a certain degree of trial and error in discovering which crops were most suitable to fit her target market and lifestyle.

Nina now grows a variety of market garden vegetables, mainly kale, garlic, peas, heirloom tomatoes, fennel, daikon, radish, spinach, rocket, edible flowers, and culinary herbs. She has a standing order with the local greengrocers for her chemical free kale, peas, herbs like dill, parsley, coriander, and chervil, and garlic when available. She also provides fresh produce on a regular basis to Sails restaurant at Noosa Heads.

Even though Banyan View Farm is cultivating a small area for market garden crops, The area can be quite productive. For example, in a season Nina was able to output 145 kilograms of

chard, 40 kilograms of daikon, 20 kilograms of spinach, 15 kilograms of fennel, 130 kilograms of kale, 150 kilograms of heirloom tomatoes, 15 kilograms of peas, 30 kilograms of rocket, 60 kilograms of garlic, 40 punnets of edible flowers, and 120 bunches of herbs. The farm also turned-off 24 steers at a carcass weight of 200 to 250 kilograms and 10 lambs.

Initial infrastructure and setup costs are high, but with these levels of production the farm can now support itself.

Nina's tips to anyone starting out are to plan ahead, be flexible, and investigate ways to work with others to reduce your input costs, for example by equipment or land sharing. Overall, take time to consider the economic return and to find out what produce is most cost effective per square metre. Nina's future goals include supplying herbs for the medicinal herb market. According to Nina, the most valuable lessons have been to be realistic, work out profitability on land area, and the immense value in diversifying the farm. This includes conducting tours, producing a range of products for food, health, or decoration, or uncovering market trends for unique products.

Case study: Noosa Black

Noosa Black is a small coffee plantation growing on just under three hectares just outside of Kin Kin, in the Noosa Shire hinterland. In 2003, Peter and Tracey Hinner bought the farm. The Hinner's plan was to grow something a little bit different with the intent of supplying to the local area. After two years of planning, which involved talking to other people, visiting other plantations, finding nursery for seedlings and preparing the paddock, they planted 6,400 coffee seedlings. Their mission was to focus on being the only and best grower and supplier of coffee in the Noosa area, hence the name. Four years later they had their first commercial crop.

Noosa Black is the Arabica k7 coffee variety. There are no chemicals used because in Australia the coffee tree does not have any natural pests. Harvesting begins mid-winter when the cherries on the coffee trees turn to red. Not all cherries ripen at once because of the east-west planting and variations in spring rains, therefore harvesting occurs several times over an eight-week period. Although hand picking can provide higher yields, harvesting is done using mechanical harvester for economic reasons. Once harvested, the cherries are then pulped using a wet method to remove the outer skin. The inner seed, or parchment, is then rinsed in water for 24 to 48 hours before being dried naturally out in the sun. The sun-dried beans are then transported to Northern New South Wales for hulling, grading, and sorting. Finally, the coffee beans are roasted locally.

The Hinner's recommendation for growing in the Noosa hinterland is to choose a niche product and to consider Noosa and greater Sunshine Coast region as your target market. In growing for the local market, they believe your product is more embraced and supported.

Noosa black is sold in IGA groceries in Pomona, Cooroy, Noosa Junction, and Caloundra, Black Ant Café in Pomona, and Heart of Cooran Café in Cooran, as well as speciality café Pantry 360 in New Farm, Brisbane. Noosa Black also supply a retail outlet at Sunshine Coast Airport. The four flavours of Noosa Black are also available for purchase online (www.noosablack.com).

Further Information

Grower Advice

Queensland Government Department of Agriculture and Fisheries grower advice:

<https://www.daf.qld.gov.au/business-priorities/plants/fruit-and-vegetables>

For a guide on soil health for vegetable production:

<https://www.daf.qld.gov.au/business-priorities/plants/fruit-and-vegetables/vegetables/soil-health-for-vegetable-production-in-australia>

Country Noosa <http://www.countrynoosa.com/>

Biodynamic Agriculture Australia Ltd <https://biodynamics.net.au>

Industry Associations

Food and Agribusiness Network (FAN) <https://foodagribusiness.org.au>

Horticulture Innovation Australia Limited <https://horticulture.com.au>

Citrus Australia <https://www.citrusaustralia.com.au/>

Custard Apples Australia Inc. <http://www.custardapple.com.au/>

Avocados Australia <https://www.avocado.org.au/>

Australian Macadamia Society <https://australianmacadamias.org/industry>

Australian Garlic Association <https://www.garlicaustralia.asn.au/>

Australian Lychee Growers Association <http://www.australianlychee.com.au/>

For a list of other industry associations

<https://www.business.qld.gov.au/industries/farms-fishing-forestry/agriculture/agriculture-associations>

Organic Certifying Bodies

Australian Certified Organic (ACO) <http://www.aco.net.au/>

AUS-QUAL Pty Ltd (AUSQUAL) <https://www.ausmeat.com.au/>

NASAA Certified Organic (NCO) <https://www.nasaacertifiedorganic.com.au/>

Organic Food Chain (OFC) <http://organicfoodchain.com.au/>

Bio-dynamics Research Institute (BDRI) <https://biodynamic.com.au/>

Processing and Marketing Co-operative

Mary Valley Country Harvest Co-operative <https://www.maryvalleycountryharvest.com>

Sunfresh Marketing Co-operative <http://www.sunfresh.com.au/>

Braidwood Garlic Co-op Ltd can provide advice for growing organic garlic.

<https://www.braidwoodgarlic.com.au/>