

# Michael Linton's Mt Eliza

... as told to Tim Bracher



## **What's going to be the next big thing in gardening and outdoor living?**

I think we may lean back to natives because of the ongoing water crisis and climate change. Ornamental deciduous trees are also coming back. They offer shade to houses in summer and let in the sun during winter, thereby reducing energy costs. Environmental awareness is slowly coming into the garden.

## **Despite its rotten soil, Mt Eliza would have to be one of the great garden locations of Victoria. Why is that so?**

I think because it has been kept as a semi-rural area. It was heavily vegetated and there have been reasonable restrictions on cutting out trees. We have a strong local environmental group and most people come to this area because of the way it is; they help to retain that. There's a lot of nature reserves throughout the area which also helps to keep that feel.

Up to the 1960s Mt Eliza was just holiday houses along the coastline, a petrol station and a store. It started to boom during the '70s when the big subdivisions began. All those gardens are now really maturing.

## **So, is Mt Eliza the perfect location for a business like Lintons?**

It may not be the perfect location, but it's a very good one. It has premium road access and a good size population with disposable income.

## **How many people do you get through here a year?**

It would have to be more than 100,000. The car park is often full. The busiest day of the year is Christmas Eve, closely followed by Mothers Day Eve, which is great because it means that people are now tuned-in to giving plants as gifts.

## **Where's your favourite spot to get away from people and unwind around Mt Eliza?**

My garden, which I manage to get into on the weekend and probably work harder in than I do during the week. I've got a lovely garden near the sea and we love walking the dogs along Canadian Bay and Daveys Bay. It helps clear out the brain and often I'm the only person on the beach at 6pm.

## **Where would you and Lu go for an anniversary dinner?**

Licciardos is an institution around here. Rob Licciardo has been going for years, but still has great food. Via Mare in Frankston does really good Italian and the Rocks in Mornington is terrific.

## **What about for a big family celebration?**

We have those at home - outside on the terrace with a barbecue; plenty of space for the grandchildren.

## **What's your favourite memory in running the business over the years?**

I remember the excitement when we set our hearts on this block of land, although the tough two years we had with council and the old Board of Works getting it rezoned was fairly gut-wrenching. Once we got that through and got an architect on board to begin the design, it was great watching it develop from whoa to go. The building is more like a cathedral than a nursery. We commissioned the architect to design a large, attractive building to let in lots of light and that didn't date. It's been up for 20 years and still looks good I think. It's just a big shed really, but the barrel roof and limestone gives the building character and it tends to be an attraction in itself. But yes, when it was going up some people did think it was the Crystal Palace being built.

*For many motorists, the limestone landmark of Linton's Garden Centre on Nepean Highway in Mt Eliza marks the end of the suburban crawl and the start of their rejuvenating Peninsula experience. Lintons has been a local institution since 1937, when it began as a wholesale nursery in Grange Road, Olivers Hill.*

*Michael Linton joined his father in the family business after it moved to Humphries Road (Mt Eliza) in the 1960s. Although its 'bread and butter' trade was in supplying tube stock for Coles Stores, the burgeoning suburbs of South Frankston and Mt Eliza convinced Michael that 'retail' was the way to go.*

*His hunch was correct and the combination of a need to expand and a study tour of the US retail garden scene prompted he and his wife, Lu, to open the Nepean Highway site in 1986.*

*Two decades later, the Linton motto "More than just a Nursery" is something of an understatement. It's a complete garden centre, offering everything from a \$2 punnet of seedlings to a \$30,000 garden makeover. In between, you can select from a vast range of giftware and home wares that could grace any Double Bay shop window. Its excellence in green thumb retailing has won Lintons a string of awards, including the coveted Garden Centre of Australia state title on four occasions and the national title twice, including the 2003 award.*

***The Linton household mantelpiece must be getting crowded - do any other nurseries bother entering when they know you're in it again?***

We've been neck and neck with The Greenery in Heidelberg during the past 6 years. With Victoria acknowledged as having the best garden centres in the country, winning the state award is almost as much an accolade as the national.

***What do the judges look for in selecting Australia's most outstanding retail garden centre?***

They have a whole checklist of attributes, including marketing, services, customer service processes, quality of stock, layout, appearance, car parking and all other facilities. It's a very comprehensive assessment.

***What's the typical reaction of first time visitors to Lintons?***

There's certainly a bit of the WOW factor. Many people drive past for years, but never have the time to call in. When they eventually pop in they are amazed at how much is here.

We get a huge amount of word-of-mouth referral trade, but being located at the gateway to the Peninsula, tourism also accounts for a solid 5-10% of our business. They come from all around Victoria and overseas. We regularly get a couple of buses a week. It's the 'icing' and the result of being an active player in the local tourism industry.

## **When did you first get the feeling that the future of garden retailing was in lifestyle, not just plants?**

When we did the U.S. study tour during the early 1980s we saw that diversification was the future in all aspects of retailing. The trend was just emerging and we got in fairly early. We learned that you had to offer a little more than general nursery items. People wanted other things, like convenience, comfort, paved areas, undercover buildings. In older style nurseries you practically need gumboots to get around.

Thank goodness we did diversify because if we had to rely on the sale of plants during this drought we would be pretty borderline by now. The cash flow is much more even as a result. Unlike most nurseries who have their peaks in spring and autumn, our biggest trading month is December.

## **Have TV lifestyle programs influenced your range of products and their presentation?**

There's a big entertainment factor with the shows, but I think they're good because the 'before and after' transformations show people exactly what they can achieve in a garden. They also indicate the current garden fashions and educate people what they should be planting at what time of the year. They possibly also help people realise that good gardening is not cheap. You can't establish a whole garden for a couple of hundred dollars. You need good quality, fairly established plants and be prepared to pay for them.

## **How quickly do fashions come and go in gardening?**

Nursery stock is subject to fashion, but they last a little longer than womens' clothing - generally about 4 to 5 years. We're led a bit by the building design industry and garden designers. We've had the cottage garden look, and at the moment you've got all the succulents and grasses for the more contemporary look. In fact, we're back to where we were in the '60s and '80s, when we sold lots of cacti, flax, cordlines and strappy leaf plants, except with a bigger range now available. Major garden trends are probably on about a 20 year cycle.