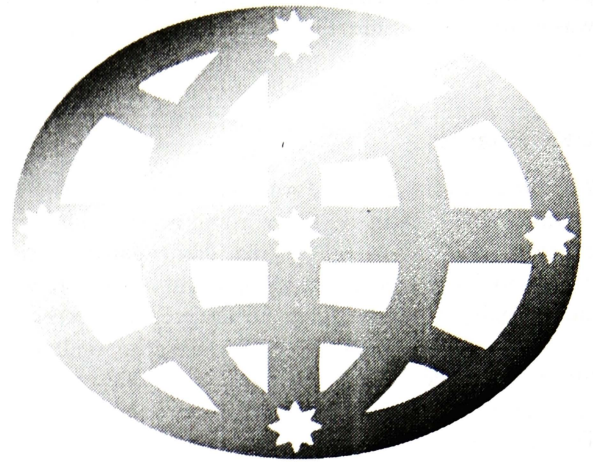


The Australian Master Tree Grower Program

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The Department of Forestry at The University of Melbourne with the financial support of the Myer Foundation, the RIRDC/LWRRDC/FWPRDC Joint Venture Agroforestry Program (JVAP)¹ and the National Farm Forestry Program (AFFA) have developed and are delivering a unique and innovative participatory outreach and extension program for farmers active in revegetation, farm forestry and remnant forest management. Since the first program in 1996, 25 regional Australian Master Tree Grower (MTG) programs have been conducted involving more than 500 landholders across Australia.

By acknowledging and drawing on the commitment and experience of locally selected tree growers, the MTG program aims to instil confidence through knowledge, provide farmers with a support network and encourage them to truly aspire to be 'master tree growers' in their own right. By starting with the landholders' motivations, rather than ending with them, the program allows participants to investigate and farm forestry projects. This is leading to the full potential of multipurpose tree growing to be realised for economic, social and environmental outcomes for farmers and their rural communities.

Based on participatory learning principles and acknowledging the importance of farmer-to-farmer training, the MTG program includes eight days of education and skills based training spread over two months. The idea behind the program is to engage a select group (around 20) of local farm forestry and revegetation leaders in mutual discussion and self-help, increasing their technical skills and confidence, broadening their experiences, and extending their interpersonal networks in farm forestry.

All programs are run within a regional community and are conducted as a partnership between the landholders, the regional supporting agencies or non-government organisations and the Department of Forestry. Participants are nominated by leading landowners, extension agents and industry members involved in developing the program. The objective is to identify those landowners, local extension agents, nursery owners, contractors and local government staff that are likely

to be influential in the development of farm forestry with the region. The emphasis is on landowners who by their own practical involvement are the focus of community attention regarding tree growing (whether it be commercial or non-commercial). Participants pay a fee of \$100 and are expected to attend all sessions and provide their properties or businesses for inspection to the rest of the group.

A uniform structure has been used in all programs around Australia to ensure that all participants are involved in similar activities, however within each of the eight sessions there is great flexibility to ensure that the regional programs deal with regional issues that are of importance to the participants.

Following an introductory session emphasising the diversity of landowners' needs and aspirations, available resources, and performance criteria, the program concentrates on the commercial market opportunities for farm tree products (wood and non-wood). This generally involves local mill visits and discussions with log buyers and identification of the target product specifications for particular markets, harvesting costs, marketing options and, finally, price.

Armed with this detail the group then examines the potential of silvicultural management to be varied so as to produce the trees and forests that will meet these specifications. Where appropriate the group visits native and plantation forests to discuss silvicultural regimes and industry and government managers are asked to justify their management by highlighting their own design criteria and performance measures. An exercise in tree and forest measurement is also included to reinforce the importance of monitoring tree performance and planning silvicultural management.

The second half of the program is centred on the properties of the landowners themselves and involves a series of site inspections where the participants describe their own projects and the group discusses design and management options. Expertise in areas such as land degradation, farm management, shelter biodiversity, wildlife management, fire, ecology (topics identified by participants) is provided by invited specialists who, rather than make formal presentations, are encouraged

to participate in discussion and highlight design principles.

All participants are expected to host a visit onto their own property or formally present a case study to the group. Participants receive a certificate of completion (not a formal university qualification), a MTG Diameter Tape, the program manual ('The Farmer's Log'), a book, *Design Principles for Farm Forestry* (Abel *et al* 1997), and a MTG farm gate sign. The Department of Forestry maintains a register of Master Tree Growers and provides ongoing direct support including a newsletter, access to information (www.mtg.unimelb.edu.au), equipment and special events such as Agroforestry Expo '99.

The significance of the title 'Master' is in recognising the knowledge, experience and potential of these carefully selected individuals to contribute to the advancement of farm forestry and regional revegetation. To succeed as growers, landowners must 'master' the practical aspects of system design, silviculture and business management and they must be supported by those with influence around them. The influence of communication between landowners on a landowner's decision to proceed with farm forestry cannot be underestimated. It is imperative that we acknowledge this and try to improve the quality of this dialogue.

Program outcomes

The outcome of the program, in terms of changed behaviour by landowners, is beginning to become apparent. A team of anthropologists have been involved in the evaluation of the program using a range of qualitative and quantitative data through questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, observations and informal discussions. Their first report highlights the unique nature of the Australian Master Tree Grower program and reports on its great success.

The evaluation of the program has been regularly conducted since early 1997 in which all participants are asked a series of questions at the start of the program, at the end of the program, and then 6 to 10 months after the completion of the program. Some of the very encouraging results from the evaluation are:

- When asked to respond to closed-end evaluation questions by either 'no better', 'a little better' or 'much better':
 - 82% of participants had a 'much better' understanding of farm forestry;
 - 61% of participants had 'much better' practical abilities in farm forestry;
 - 54% of participants can provide 'much better' advice on farm forestry;
 - 64% of participants can evaluate 'much better' the opportunities for farm forestry;
 - 68% of participants can develop farm forestry projects 'much better'
 - 79% of participants have a 'much better' understanding of the farm forestry interests of other people in their region; and
- 82% of participants have 'much better' opportunities for networking on farm forestry issues.
- (In all questions there was less than a 0.5% response to 'no better')
- Six to 10 months after the completion of the program participants have reported a doubling of the number of trees planted. Importantly almost twice as many participants six to 10 months after the programs completion have stated they are now actively engaged in managing these trees as compared to the start of the program.
- Six to 10 months after the completion of the program, participants have reported a diverse and growing range of marketing awareness and activities undertaken by graduates, indicating a more practical and realistic assessment of the participant's regional farm forestry opportunities.
- Six to 10 months after the completion of the program, networking between participants has doubled. This includes the sharing of knowledge, technical skills and marketing opportunities and the expansion in the diversity of people in which farm forestry is discussed.



The evaluation of the MTG program has illustrated the enthusiasm of participants about their participation in the program. There seems to be several reasons for this:

- The national program coordinators have developed and are implementing a course delivery model that satisfies participant's needs by encouraging participants to share responsibility for designing and implementing their local program. Through this participants and other stakeholders take control and adapt the basic structure of the program to suit their local conditions and regional issues.
- Program participants benefit from the close association with the Department of Forestry, which provides recognition and legitimisation to local tree growers, who often feel somewhat isolated and out of step with neighbours because of their farm forestry and revegetation activities.
- The positive dynamics and diversity of participants and invited 'specialists' has ensured the critical discussion and evaluation of up-to-date and relevant knowledge. This is not only as a one way flow from 'specialist' to landholder, but also between landholders and from landholder to 'specialist'. This information flow, the diversity of participants and the sharing of a common goal of better land management have also led to the establishment of both strong formal and informal networks throughout Australia.

- The very practical nature and on-site teaching arenas of the program ensures a very comfortable learning environment.
- The primary and explicit goal of the program is to provide a structure in which landholders can explore their motivations and take responsibility for their own revegetation designs and activities.

Feedback from participants indicates the success of the program:

‘Meeting people with a commitment to tree planting and the environment and therefore coming away from each session highly motivated to expand and continue our tree program’ (South West Slopes, NSW)

‘In a community that in the past has been deeply polarised by forest issues, it was so constructive to have the blend of people that we did and the discussion and broadening of perspective’s that ensured’ (Eden, NSW)

‘The program provided an excellent overview of farm forestry and gave us the tools required for doing our own research for our own purposes’ (Hastings, NSW)

‘The whole program was very educational. Particularly sharing of experiences from each participant and field visits. The group, although a diversity of people, was very safe to express oneself in’ (Armidale, NSW)

‘The hands-on approach appeals to me greatly and aids my learning process’ (Armidale, NSW)

‘I thought the program was excellent. Particularly in the way it encouraged and valued people with hands-on experience to share their knowledge’ (Armidale, NSW)

‘I found all areas useful. Good printed material and a good size mixed group. The 8 weeks were well balanced and professionally run’ (Beaudesert, Qld)

‘The opportunity to exchange ideas, info and expertise with others was, in my view, the most useful aspect’ (Hastings, NSW)

‘Have loved the program. I have really enjoyed the participants – shared many common goals and dreams! I look forward to many more combined group gatherings, field trips etc., or just get together. Cheers’ (Ipswich, Qld)

‘Success and failure of participants plantings on their own properties and learning of their experiences was invaluable’ (Geelong, Vic)

‘Brilliant program. Thank you’ (Albany, WA) 🍷

Note

- 1 RIRDC: Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation
LWRRDC: Land and Water Resources Research and Development Corporation (now Land & Water Australia)
FWPRDC: Forest & Wood Products Research & Development Corporation.

Reference

Abel, Nick, *et al.* 1997, *Design Principles for Farm Forestry*, Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation, Barton ACT, <http://www.rirdc.gov.au/reports/AFT/alldesign.pdf>