
OUTGROWER PROGRAMME: FLORICULTURE TECHNICAL EXCHANGE IN FIJI

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To promote floriculture, South Sea Orchids (SSO) has established an outgrower programme in Fiji, which provides a temperate climate and market links to Asia, Australia and New Zealand. The aim of the project was to foster female empowerment across Fiji by teaching women how to grow flowers through workshops and information booklets. The floriculture industry has improved as a result of more marketable produce being grown, and women have been able to create their own sources of income to spend on their own priorities.

Cover Orchids: A small industry with great potential

Floriculture technical exchanges have been undertaken by SSO, or South Sea Orchids, since their outgrower programme started in 1994. SSO is a floriculture-based business which first started in Suva and was then re-established in 1987 at Saweni Beach, Lautoka. It was then moved to Nasau, in Nadi, in 2002. It is mainly owned and operated by Donald and Aileen Burness, who are both Fijian citizens. The core business is a nursery which sells both cut flowers and plants and, in addition, runs pre-booked eco tourist garden tours. Because of the establishment of the outgrower programme, the Fiji Floriculture Association was formed, which 150 growers are members of. It is run by a committee made up of growers and, through the association, an Australian Aid (AusAID) funded poverty alleviation project was undertaken in the Koroipita and Housing Assistance Relief Trust (HART) villages.

The main purpose of this project was to develop a world class floriculture industry that would make a significant contribution to the livelihoods of Fijians. This can be achieved because of:

- The local climate that enables Fijians to grow a wide range of tropical flowers and leaves;
- Fiji's favourable pest and disease status, compared with other flower growing countries;
- A fast-growing local market for floriculture products;

- Fiji's strategic location with respect to overseas markets; and
- The skills and motivation of the women growers.

The main objective was to teach growers the correct growing and harvesting practices for specific tropical plants in high demand from florists, namely orchids, anthuriums, ginger and heliconias. The project has grown to include men too.

The project

There are many women who are not able to work because they have to look after their children, so the outgrower project offers them the ability to make money without having to leave their homes. Even if it is a small income, it contributes to the family's overall earnings and empowers women to use the money they earn for their own priorities, rather than being dependant on their husbands, whose priorities may be different. This was the main reason why Mrs Burness, CEO of SSO, started the project. She felt that if women had money, they would be able to prioritise their childrens' needs. That is why SSO decided to run workshops for new growers and to produce helpful manuals at the SSO farm.

The emphasis remained on economic empowerment and improving the local market for floriculture products. Equally, encouraging interested



smallholder farmers to grow flowers by facilitating their access to markets and training growers in good farming techniques, was an important aspect of the project.

The first workshops took place after a feasibility study was conducted by Dr Andrew McGregor, which concluded that the project had potential. Without the initial feasibility study, gaining funding for the project would not have been possible. SSO was one of only a few nurseries in Fiji and it had a vision of expanding the almost non-existent floriculture industry. A fundamental aspect of improving the industry was giving growers and florists the necessary training in order for them to be able to supply marketable products. Therefore, subsequent to the study, the workshops began.

Floriculture was an extremely small industry in Fiji but had great potential because of the favourable climate for tropical flowers and local interest driven by the aesthetic value of plants, flowers and floral art. With biosecurity approval, flowers and plants from Fiji are now regularly supplied to Samoa and Tonga.

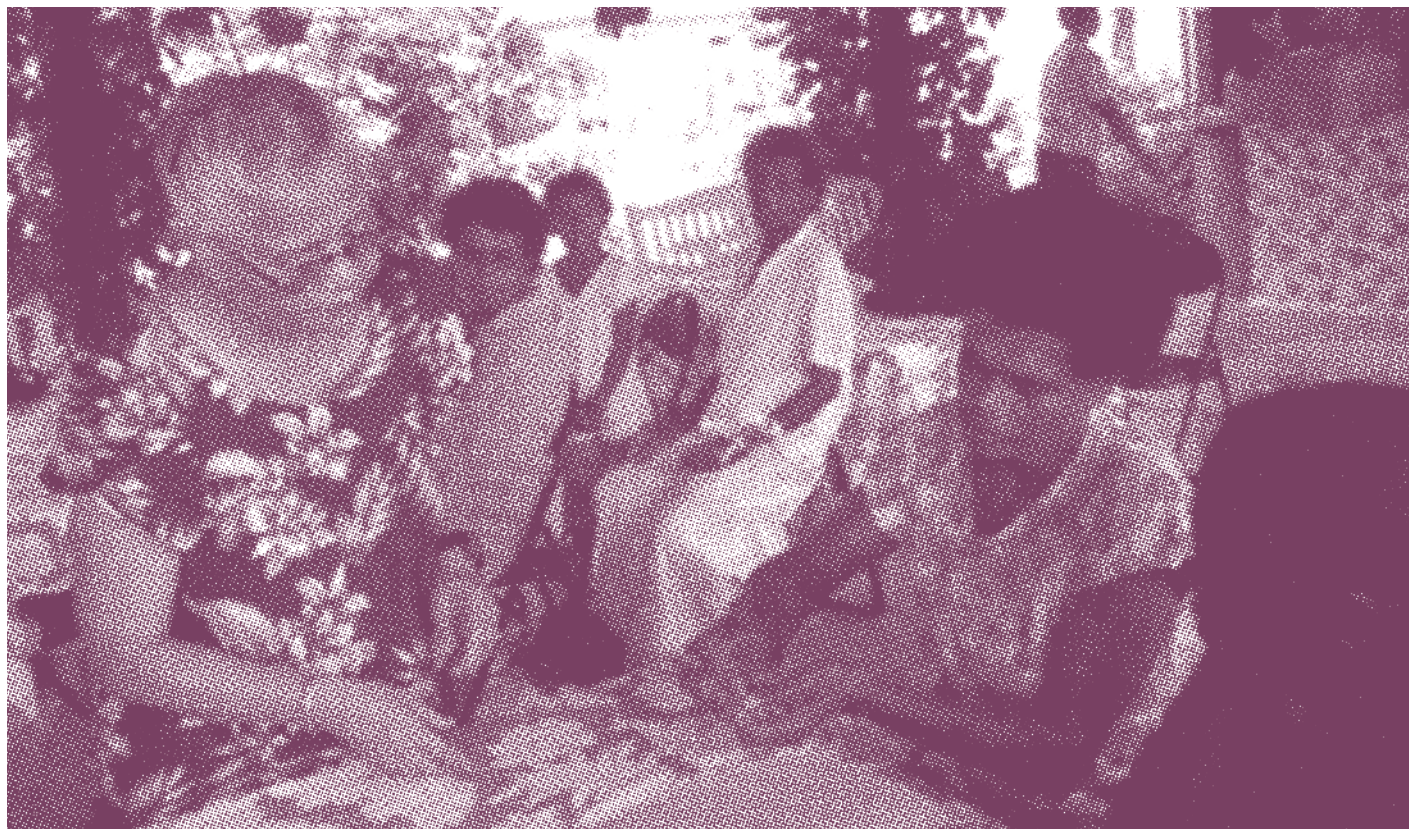
Before the SSO outgrower programme, florists had to source their flowers from various individual growers and therefore there were not many florists, due to the laborious nature of this task. By creating the outgrower programme, good quality flowers were made available for purchase through two distribution

centres in Nadi and Suva. This has resulted in an increased number of florists.

SSO became a partner to CTA, which was instrumental in increasing their ability to disseminate information about effective growing practices. CTA funded all the manuals that were produced and used to train participants in both local and regional workshops. They also funded the production of three manuals for smallholder producers in Fiji, with a lot of technical and detailed knowledge about orchids, anthuriums, ginger and heliconias. However, they are very lengthy and feedback from the many workshops, conducted both locally and regionally, reflected a need for a simplification of the training material. In 2007, with further funding from CTA, the production of two new booklets was possible: “Smallholder flower production in Fiji”, a booklet that described the growing practices of orchids, anthuriums, ginger and heliconias in a compact and practical manner, and “Floriculture in Fiji as a small and micro business”, with basic information for starting a small business in floriculture.

With these booklets, SSO was also able to train participants in poverty alleviation in the Koroipita and HART villages. This project was funded by AusAID, where 15 women in each village were provided shade houses (a shelter used to protect plants from the sun) and 200 orchid plants each.

*Above Orchids and
Anthuriums grown at the
SSO farm*



Above From training workshops to a growing business

A key aspect in the success of this project was the weekly field visits, which took place for 2 years to ensure that the training was put into practice. This was done mainly by SSO field officers. At the end of the 2 years, the most reliable growers were identified by Floriculture Support Association committees and they received more intensive, hands-on training from SSO, so that they could begin to oversee other growers. SSO remained available if any further technical assistance was required.

Challenges

Security was one of the major problems in Koroipita and some growers had plants stolen from their shade houses. To reduce this problem, wire mesh was installed around the bottom of the shade houses. Growers were also advised to plant sheena's gold, a thorny shrub, around the sides of their shade houses to prevent people from stealing their plants.

Natural disasters, such as flooding, was another major problem faced by growers in 2009. Two thirds of the anthuriums plants and orchids were lost by SSO growers as a result of such weather events. The loss of these plants was particularly devastating due to their cost and the difficulties associated with importing new orchids from abroad. Biosecurity checks mean that this can be a time-consuming process.

There was a demand for more of a variety of plants and so *Guzmania* plants were imported from Thailand and distributed to growers. CTA then funded the production of SSO's third manual in 2013; the Fiji floriculture handbook contained all of the information from the previous two booklets plus information about how to grow *Guzmanias*.

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New businesses

Over the years, many requests for SSO to conduct workshops, both locally and regionally, have been received from different groups who want to expand their knowledge on how to start their own businesses and market their products. SSO even began planting *yasi* in 2017, when the Fijian Ministry of Forestry supplied SSO with 1,000 *yasi* plants, which were distributed to 35 farmers in the western division.

SSO also conducted workshops in Papua New Guinea in 2005, Tonga in 2015 and 2016, Solomon Islands in 2009, 2010 and 2011 and Vanuatu in 2010. Recently, SSO have been working very closely with the Pacific Island Farmers Organisation Network and, in 2014, SSO conducted a workshop in Samoa.

In addition to working with NGOs, SSO has been asked to conduct workshops for the Ministry of Agriculture for participants from Ba, Lautoka and Nadi, Suva and Taveuni. The objective of all of the workshops that have been conducted over the last 4 years has always been to help to improve the quality and consistency of the floriculture market.



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