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Banking on native nuts

Australia's native macadamia nut is being 'banked' for future environmental and economic prosperity.

The National Macadamia Germplasm Conservation Program has established gene banks in a bid to preserve Australia's wild macadamia varieties, which are under threat from urban development and the clearing of lowland rainforests.

CSIRO Plant Industry scientist Dr Craig Hardner says the gene banks are a deposit of 700 wild varieties of macadamia tree in plantations located at Caboolture and Tiaro, Queensland, and Alstonville, NSW.



"The trees have been grown from cuttings collected from 75 wild macadamia populations and are a culmination of many years work by botanists, researchers and industry to find, assess and preserve the most diverse range of macadamia genetic material possible," says Dr Hardner.

"Macadamias are native to Australia and have a long history - Aboriginal people prized them as a delicacy. Because they're such a part of Australia's heritage, it makes it even more important to preserve these wild varieties of macadamias.

"Our research uses modern technologies to identify the original habitats of some wild varieties. This allows us, if necessary, to protect the original locations of the wild varieties, which may be under threat from clearing."

While enabling researchers to access and investigate the genetic characteristics of Australia's wild macadamia varieties to help preserve their diversity, the gene banks will also provide information for use in a breeding program.

"This research is not only an investment in the future biodiversity of macadamias and the Australian environment, but also of the Australian macadamia industry," says Dr Hardner.

President of the Australian Macadamia Society, Cliff James says the investment makes for a win-win situation for the economy and the environment.

"Australia's \$100 million plus industry has reclaimed the macadamia as the world's largest producer," says Mr James.

"But the world nut market holds considerable scope for expansion in macadamias, and the program promises to help bolster Australia's macadamia export position through efficient production and quality reassurance," says Mr James.

The result of a collaborative effort between the macadamia industry, the federal government and CSIRO, the National Macadamia Germplasm Conservation Program provides an ongoing opportunity for research and development for new commercial varieties.

"The ideal tree would be compact, growing to no more than seven metres and bare little nuts with thin, easy to crack shells.

"If you're using macadamias in confectionary you don't want a gobstopper, so the opportunities for small macadamias with their unique, exotic flavour within in the confectionary trade are very exciting," says Mr James.

"But equally important to economic possibilities are the environmental benefits gained through conserving our native rainforest flora, helping to maintain Australia's biodiversity. The Australian Macadamia Society is proud to be associated with the initiative," says Mr James.

Gerard McEvelly, Horticulture Australia Program Manager says "It's great that something that is 'fair dinkum' Australian can help the nation's economy.

"The genetic diversity of Australia's seven macadamia types is Australia's secret weapon against competing

international producers with fewer macadamia types," says Mr McEvelly.

"The gene banks mean new varieties can be bred to take full advantage of the natural wild flavours, help to maintain production of high quality kernels, and be better suited to Australian commercial growing requirements.

"Without the initiative and support of the macadamia industry, matched by Commonwealth funding, this project would not be able to do the good work that it does."

The Program is to be officially launched on 30 March 2001 at the Caboolture Region Environment Education Centre by Councillor Joy Leishman, Mayor, Caboolture Shire Council.

More information from:

Dr Craig Hardner, CSIRO Plant Industry 07 3214 2659

Mr Andrew Heap, Australian Macadamia Society 02 6622 4933

Mr Gerard McEvelly, Horticulture Australia 02 8295 2300

Rachael Mitchell, CSIRO, 02 6246 5323, mobile 0417 240 261

Email: Rachael.Mitchell@pi.csiro.au

www.pi.csiro.au/macadamia

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Contacts

Mr Nick Goldie

Journalist
PO Box 225
Dickson ACT 2602

Phone: +61 2 6276 6478

Fax: +61 2 6276 6821

Mobile: 0417 299 586

Email: Nick.Goldie@csiro.au