

Industry speaks: We need a green infrastructure policy

By Michael Casey, President, Australian Institute of Horticulture



Michael Casey, President of the Australian Institute of Horticulture is calling for a green infrastructure policy to address two important industry issues: climate change and our next generation workforce (Image: Australian Institute of Horticulture)

In the lead up to the 2022 Federal Election, Greenlife Industry Australia (GIA) is asking industry leaders to share their hopes for the future of the horticulture industry. Michael Casey, President of the Australian Institute of Horticulture, is calling for a green infrastructure policy to address two important industry issues: climate change and our next generation workforce.

For the past three decades I have educated myself in all facets of the horticultural industry from my initial TAFE studies through to Diploma, Degree and Specialist Certificate courses at a tertiary level. I have had the privilege of pursuing my passion all while growing my business (now businesses), my knowledge and industry network. Anyone who started working in the industry from the early 90's onwards was afforded the opportunity to train and work with a range of career pathways on offer.

At the start of my career, my focus was predominately on beautifying residential and commercial properties. However, the past 10 years has seen my work far more concentrated on 'must have' rather than 'nice to have' elements. This has meant that there is now a requirement and moral obligation on my part to provide greenery into spaces as built structures both engulf more of our building envelope and as urbanisation encroaches into peri urban and regional spaces removing much needed biodiversity and plant life.

In instances where green spaces have been stripped of life, covered with impermeable surface and transformed into urban heat sinks, this is an area that is posing a larger problem. Local councils and state governments are doing a commendable job at producing strategic 'green plans' aimed at educating the public and relevant professionals about what needs to be addressed but we need further 'green action' where this is incorporated as standard (non-negotiable) requirements in

building contracts. Essentially a federal level green infrastructure approach/policy that is mandated and rolled out at state and local levels will future proof our green environments.

As we fast head into another Federal election, we cannot ignore the significant issue that confronts us/our civilisation which is living with a changing climate. It has been known for long enough that Australia is a continent that is very susceptible to climatic change and this needs to be practically managed to a greater extent, but we continue to grow and build our cities with materials such as steel, concrete and other raw materials that simply adds to the problem rather than addressing it.

Our greening strategies are not currently mandated, nor does this look likely in the near future. Policies need to provide clear guidance that can help inform relevant authorities to ensure built environments include green spaces for social, economic and environmental benefit/gain and not for marketing purposes to sell property. These gains include greener neighbourhoods, cleaner air, a better connection to nature, calm and relaxing environments and more importantly cooler surrounds to name but a few.

We are also now confronting an issue bigger than what our industry has ever experienced previously. We have the younger population that is keeping a very close eye on what is happening, and they have the passion and drive to make a difference. However, we do not seem to fully harness these values. As a current trainer/educator of youth, I experience this each week when I teach my students. They want change and are eager and prepared to make a difference. They need thorough and clearly defined career paths which are likely to only materialise on the back of mandating green spaces into our built environment. This will create a more secure working future within the profession. We have the interest and the future workforce in place, we now need more emphasis on training.

Given how significantly my focus has changed over a long period, I now work and partner primarily with others who are also committed to changing our built environments. I plan to continue my work in this sector by guiding and educating youth on this important area of horticulture that has the potential to break significant environmental, social and economic ground.

This Federal election without question needs to address the seriousness of climate change by mandating green inclusions onto our buildings and cities, promoting and celebrating our industry and the works of designers, consultants, nurseries and all other disciplines that are included in the formation of greening spaces.

This will ensure our dedicated students and future 'green warriors' have a future ahead of them and an education pathway. Most importantly, they need to be provided a future without the threat of a warming climate, deadly storm activities, food insecurity and the many other issues facing our children as they prosper.

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