The Australian Master TreeGrower Program: The development, delivery and evaluation of a national extension program.

Rowan Reid

National Coordinator, Australian Master TreeGrower Program, 55 Main St. BIRREGURRA, 3241
Senior Fellow, Department of Forest and Ecosystem Science, The University of Melbourne
Founding member and project officer of the Otway Agroforestry Network

Email: rowan.reid@agroforestry.net.au
WWW: www.agroforestry.net.au

Summary

The Australian Master TreeGrower is an extension and education program devised by Rowan Reid in 1996 whilst working as an academic at the University of Melbourne. Ninety-three regional Australian Master TreeGrower courses (each 8 days) have now been conducted around Australia involving more than 1800 participants and 30 partner organisations. The course uses education and peer learning, rather than training, to engage and support landholders in the design, establishment and management of trees and native vegetation. In 2000, the Australian Master TreeGrower Program was awarded the Eureka Prize for Excellence in Environmental Education.

A succession of evaluations, both internally and independently commissioned, have concluded that the Australian Master TreeGrower program is an innovative and successful extension initiative which is highly regarded by both participants and partnering organisations. Follow-up surveys of participants also report that the program has not only increased the area of managed forest on farmland, but has also increased the complexity and diversity of management practices.

Master TreeGrowers report that after the course they became more involved in Landcare groups, agroforestry networks, farm timber cooperatives and branches of the Australian Forest Growers. In 2006, the Australian Master TreeGrower Program and the Otway Agroforestry Network developed a Peer Group Mentoring concept for these regional groups which trains, then pays, landholders to assist others with their forestry projects.

Introduction

The Australian Master TreeGrower Program (MTG) is an extension and education program for landholders interested in growing trees on their own land to support agricultural production, enhance biodiversity, protect soil and water resources, and produce commercial tree products and services. The program was developed in 1996 by Rowan Reid (whilst an academic at The University of Melbourne) after an international review of the role of universities in the delivery of extension support to non-industrial private forest owners.

The program has since delivered ninety-three, 8-day, regional education courses across Australia in partnership with more than 30 organisations and involving over 1800 participants and 100 presenters. The Australian Master TreeGrower Program has also supported the development and trialling of regional Peer Group Mentoring (PGM) projects aimed at encouraging and supporting farmer-to-farmer communication by experienced tree growers.
This paper reviews the extension and educational philosophy underpinning the Australian Master TreeGrower Program and outlines how activities are structured to support landholder, industry and community participation in forest management on farms. The findings of internal and independent reviews highlight what makes the Australian Master TreeGrower Program different to many other extension programs and the impact it is having on landholders and their land management.

**Starting with the farmers, not the forest**

Although the term *farm forestry* is commonly used interchangeably with *agroforestry* in Australia (Race and Curtis 1996), many observers and practitioners seem to use the first to refer to blocks of timber plantations on farm land and the latter for cases where crops are grown or pasture is grazed amongst widely spaced commercial timber trees (CSIRO 2001). These concepts have been further complicated by the introduction of terms like *alley farming*, *timberbelts*, *tree cropping*, *phase farming* and *tree farming*.

Prosser (1995) produced a diagram aimed at describing how the many types of tree growing sat within a spectrum of related practices (Figure 1). Using the degree of emphasis on timber production and the scale of planting as the primary criteria, the model suggested that farm forestry fits, albeit uneasily, between the two extremes of land protection plantings on farms and industrial forestry on land that was once used for farming. This model has been widely accepted by plantation industry groups and government agencies (www.daff.gov.au/forestry/plantation-farm-forestry).

![Diagrammatic representation of the definitions of agroforestry, farm forestry and related practices as proposed by Prosser (1995).](image)

**Figure 1.** Diagrammatic representation of the definitions of agroforestry, farm forestry and related practices as proposed by Prosser (1995).

The author has argued for many years, apparently with little success, that it is not appropriate to define *farm forestry*, or *agroforestry*, as a predefined set of land use practices, or to distinguish it from other forms of revegetation on the basis of scale, appearance or purpose (Reid and Stewart 1994, Reid 1995, Reid 2008, Reid and Stephen 1999, 2001, 2007). As Alexandra and Hall (1998, p.15) argue, *the lumping of all forestry together tends to blur the issues which are important to farm forestry*. Pearson *et al.* (2000, p. 20) add that language is...
important and acceptance of farm forestry is made more difficult when it is confused with social, stakeholder and environmental issues which relate to plantation or industrial forestry. Schirmer (2000) confirms that, amongst those in the rural communities where industrial forestry is seen as a threat, farm forestry or the development of plantations on agricultural land owned by farmers (p. 27) is seen as very different to industrial plantation forestry despite the fact that it may involve the same species grown in a similar manner.

Hence, what clearly distinguishes forestry by farmers from corporate, industrial or government forestry is ownership. Not just ownership of the land or the trees, but ownership of the decisions to do it and how it is done. In 2001 we proposed the following definition (Reid and Stephen 2001):

**Farm Forestry (or agroforestry) is the commitment of resources by farmers, alone or in partnerships, towards the establishment or management of forests on their land.**

Just as we define farming as something done by farmers — farm forestry and agroforestry are land management practices that arise from farmers choosing to grow and manage forests for any mix of the benefits the vegetation might provide: They (farmers) may place an emphasis on a single outcome, such as timber production or biodiversity, or they may seek to balance a range of benefits in a multipurpose planting. Their priorities may vary over the farm and change over time. A forest initially established or managed for wildlife or land protection might later be harvested for timber or valued for its beauty. Forests on farms may increase agricultural production or simply displace it. They might be sustainable, even improve economic, social and environmental capital, or they may deplete these assets. The farmer, or their partners, may profit from farm forestry or come to regret their involvement. (Reid and Stephen 2007).

In developing the Australian Master TreeGrower Program our objective has been to drive farm forestry and agroforestry development in a way that reflects the aspirations and interests of the farming community: It should look and feel like forestry by farmers for farmers, and should reflect the diversity of interests, resources and aspirations of the farming community (Reid 2008 p 7).

**Supporting farmer-led forestry development**

Governments have employed a wide range of strategies aimed at promoting and supporting tree growing on farms. Reflecting the discussion on definitions, these can be divided into two categories: (1) those that assume forestry on farms is a collection of discrete technologies or options that can be presented to farmers for them to accept or reject, or (2) those which view effective adoption as a process by which farmers interpret, adapt and design practices within the context of a unique set of social, ecological and economic circumstances.

The first approach focuses on instructing farmers in the implementation of the preferred options or best bets as determined by the proponents. If, or usually when, the target audience (farmers) reject the preferred models the focus tends to shift to clearing the apparent impediments to adoption. Not surprisingly, the cost associated with adopting these models, and the associated long and uncertain wait before any benefits flow back to the farmer, is often identified as the major barrier holding back an expected flood of farmer enthusiasm and investment. The standard response is to provide up-front financial incentives to get farmers over the investment hurdle and on their way to success.
Over the last 15 years successive Victorian governments have initiated farm forestry projects (e.g. FFORNE, West RFA, Sawlogs for Salinity, Plantations for Greenhouse etc) which have provided up-front payments of around $500-$700 per hectare for the establishment of plantations on farms. In each case, the funds were only available to landholders who agreed to plant the preferred species, in the prescribed way, across a minimum area, on sites deemed viable by the program managers. Similar programs have been introduced in other states over the years and rarely last more than the standard 3-year funding cycle.

Many authors (Black et al. 2000, Giger 1999, Dhubhain and Wall 1999, Hurley 1986), along with the author (Reid 2004) have raised concerns about the use of this type of direct incentive in farm forestry. These include the arguments that direct incentives:

- stifle farmer innovation and adaptation by not involving them in the design;
- encourage over commitment by specifying minimum areas resulting in an inability or reluctance to maintain the forest;
- reward mismanagement, neglect or inappropriate farming practices by targeting landholdings where past management has contributed to the problem;
- undermine early adopters by not rewarding those farmers who have implemented similar technologies prior to the availability of the incentives;
- actively discourage partnerships between landholders and third party private investors by denying opportunities for private partners to draw direct benefits;
- result in a welfare mindset amongst landholders to the point that many assume that conservation and tree growing are a public, rather than a private, responsibility; and
- promote options that are inherently unattractive.

Presumably, if the options being presented were attractive then direct financial incentives of this type would not be required.

The author has also questioned the potential of subsidised forestry projects to act as demonstrations: *The fact that the sites required a subsidy provides a clear signal to other landholders that private investment is likely to be unviable or unwarranted. Indeed, those who do accept direct incentives for the establishment of demonstrations often express a perceived lack of ownership and an expectation of ongoing support for maintenance. In many cases the sites end up as demonstrations of what happens when a forest is neglected* (Reid 2004).

Campbell (1994 p 200) argues that *the complexities inherent in sustainability and the primacy of farmers in making land management decisions mean that a recipe approach to land management recommendations won’t work.* Farmers are essentially self-directed learners who seek out knowledge which is most relevant to their current needs and problems and integrate it into their own frame of reference (Guerin and Guerin 1994). Once they determine for themselves that planting and managing trees is profitable, appropriate, involves an acceptable level of risk, is compatible with their farm and private goals and can be easily integrated into existing farm practices then adoption will follow relatively quickly (Barr and Cary 1992). Adoption, particularly in forestry, is no guarantee of the ongoing commitment to the management that is so often required in order to produce the products and services these programs were intended to provide.

The alternative approach is to assist farmers to determine how, and in what form, their participation in tree growing can provide real and sustainable improvements in their own quality of life (Byron 2001). The degree to which the outcomes will also meet the needs or
interests of particular industry sectors, government agencies or conservation groups will largely depend on the extent to which there are shared goals, a capacity and willingness amongst farmers to act, adequate rewards for those who provide the services or products sought by others, and the degree to which penalties are imposed on landholders for any negative externalities which might be driving the public interest in revegetation (e.g. weeds, soil erosion, salinity etc).

Whilst this suggests a farmer first approach (Chambers et al. 1990, Scoone and Thompson 1994), it is also critical that the interest of non-farming stakeholders and their right to participate in rural development is acknowledged (Lanyon 1994). Extension therefore becomes a process of achieving change through the facilitation of a social learning process (King 2000) that encourages farmers, communities, industry and governments to clearly define their own interests and expectations and publicly acknowledge where the costs and benefits lie. Coutts (1994) provides a useful model that links the three generally accepted extension paradigms - technology transfer, problem solving and education - with a higher level one he calls human development (Figure 2).

![Diagrammatic representation of four extension paradigms as proposed by Coutts (1994)](image)

**Figure 2.** Diagrammatic representation of four extension paradigms as proposed by Coutts (1994)

Facilitating farmer participation in forestry development encourages a pluralistic, evolutionary and accountable approach to development (Anderson 1998, Race et al. 2001): pluralistic in that it works towards a diversity of outcomes in recognition of the diversity inherent in the economic, social and environmental landscape; evolutionary by encouraging innovation and adaptation in response to changing circumstances over time; and accountable by asking farmers to accept responsibility for land use decisions and requiring stakeholders to be answerable to the wider communities for their actions or inactions.

When farmers make a personal commitment to the establishment and management of trees on their farm, it is their story, rather than their trees, that provides the best demonstration of the innovation.
The Australian Master TreeGrower Program

The goal of the Australian Master TreeGrower Program is to contribute to the development of resilient farming landscapes that can deliver the range of economical, social and environmental values sought by current and future generations. Our assumption is that the establishment of new trees and shrubs, and the management of existing forests, has a role to play in addressing many of the problems and opportunities faced by Australian farmers and that, in satisfying these, there will be benefits that flow back to the wider community.

Rather than promoting any particular species, plantation model or product option, our starting point is the design of unique forestry solutions that reflect each individual’s own circumstances. Before they act, landholders must be confident that the suite of benefits they expect to capture as forest owners will outweigh the many costs and risks involved. Designs that provide short term benefits or reduce existing threats are often favoured over those that have a long pay-back period or introduce new risks.

The choice of the word ‘Master’ is deliberate in that the program supports landholders as they face the challenge of deciding what type of trees to grow, over what area and for what purpose, and ultimately accept responsibility for these decisions. The Australian Master TreeGrower Program offers participants the skills and technologies they have come to expect from extension providers (technology transfer), while practicing a diagnosis and design approach (problem solving and education) and building the capacity, networks and confidence required for them to take on a role in farm forestry development (Figure 2).

The 8-day course

In 1996, with support from the Myer Foundation, Reid developed and ran the first Australian Master TreeGrower course with the Otway Agroforestry Network in Victoria. Most of the participants were farmers but there were also nurserymen, contractors and extension officers. Over the next year similar courses were run in Western Australia, New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland. Based on this pilot the Australian Government’s Joint Venture Agroforestry Program (JVAP) began funding the Australian Master TreeGrower Program in 1998. Land & Water Australia (LWA) provided additional funding in 2006 to broaden the content to involve native vegetation management more generally.

Each regional Australian Master TreeGrower course is presented as a partnership between The Master TreeGrower Program (MTG Inc.), the participants and one or a number of regional partner groups or organisations. Whilst every program is different, reflecting the different issues and opportunities in each region, there is a commonality in purpose and style. To ensure this, we developed a framework for regional courses to follow (Table 1). How regions ‘fill-in’ the framework is flexible and depends on the local land management issues, the motives of the regional partners and the interests of the participants.

Ninety-three regional Australian Master TreeGrower courses have now been conducted across Australia covering much of the agricultural landscape (Figure 3). We have also provided many refresher courses for past participants; conducted regional workshops with stakeholder groups; contributed to numerous field days and seminars; presented at local, national and international conferences; published popular and peer-reviewed books, chapters and research papers; and contributed to a number of television and radio presentations.
Table 1. Whilst every Australian Master TreeGrower course is different they all follow a similar four-part framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. Mastering trees on farms (1 day)</th>
<th>Introduce the concept of agroforestry and farm forestry as farmers growing trees to meet their own needs (e.g. shelter stock and crops, control land degradation, provide wildlife habitat and generate income, etc.) and those of the wider community. Introduce principles of agroforestry design and the management of multi-purpose forests on farms.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. Growing trees for conservation and profit (3 days)</td>
<td>Review the prospects for timber (e.g. sawlogs, firewood, etc) and non-wood products (e.g. oils, bush foods, etc) and the emerging markets for carbon, biodiversity and other environmental services. Learn how to measure and monitor forest growth and values with the Australian Master TreeGrower diameter tape. Cover the fundamentals of tree growth and the principles of silviculture.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Integrating trees into our farms (3 days)</td>
<td>Explore opportunities for multi-purpose tree growing on the participants’ own properties through field tours and expert presentations. Topics reflect farmer and community interests such as biodiversity, shade and shelter, native forest management, salinity control, soil protection and landscape design.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Shaping future landscapes (1 day)</td>
<td>Introduce the tools commonly used for the economic evaluation of forests (Discounted Cash Flow Analysis) and discuss alternative approaches for project evaluation. Review research and development needs in the region. Support an agroforestry network or Landcare group. Conclude with the presentation of MTG gate signs and certificates to completing participants.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Evaluation of the Australian Master TreeGrower course

In their national review of farm forestry extension and education, Bauer and Gordon (2003) recognised that the Australian Master TreeGrower course had caused four types of change to the businesses of participants and the sector generally:

1) an increase in the number of trees planted;
2) an increase in the adoption rates of productivity–boosting site and species selection technology among Master TreeGrowers;
3) the ‘echo effect’ — agroforestry technology is transferred from Master TreeGrower participants to other agroforesters by example and other knowledge transfer; and,
4) changes in the reasons that farmers plant trees.

They also estimated the program had provided a return on public investment of around $16M and a benefit-cost investment ratio of 11:1 as a result of increased tree planting and improved...
A social researcher engaged by the Joint Venture Agroforestry Program to undertake an independent telephone survey of past participants later concluded:

Nearly every participant involved in this course found the programme enjoyable, effective and value for time and money. It would appear that the principle objectives of establishing networks and providing people with confidence to undertake farm forestry projects, works. This programme is highly regarded and appreciated by the vast majority of those who have participated. The emphasis on learning and participation has been an important strength to the programme. However, the diligence and commitment to evaluating the impact of the course on stated objectives and regular review of course content and delivery has also been significant in its ongoing improvement (Frost 2005 p 4).

Since 1999, the Australian Master TreeGrower Program has engaged social scientists to help evaluate and guide program delivery and evaluation. One such study, led by a senior University of Melbourne anthropologist, concluded that the program was:

stimulating the active involvement of farmers in the establishment, management and marketing of trees and forest products; encouraging enhanced landholder participation in regional and national farm forestry research and extension; and, developing and implementing a course delivery model that satisfies participant’s needs (O’Meara and Wright 1999).

Years later, Dr O’Meara, who has been involved in the monitoring and evaluation of dozens of development projects around the world, had this to say about the Australian Master TreeGrower Program (O’Meara, email, 2009 pers.comm.):

I can say without reservation that the MTG, as I monitored and reviewed it during the period from 1997 through 2000, is the best project I have seen in terms of its design and implementation and likely also in its benefit-to-cost ratio.

The most recent internal evaluation was undertaken by Wayne Deans (Reid and Deans 2009). Deans interviewed 250 past Australian Master TreeGrower participants in 2008-9 which represented 16% of the total at the time. The sample reflected the proportion of past participants by state and gender balance (72% male and 28% female). Of these, 52% stated that they were landholders with mostly off-farm income, and 37% stated they were landholders with mostly on-farm income. Another 11% declared they had no significant farm or forest landholding but were active in landcare and other community based natural resource management groups or employed with state agencies.

When Deans asked the Master TreeGrowers the open question: What is your purpose in establishing and managing trees or vegetation on your farm? respondents reported the importance of shelter, income and biodiversity in equal measure (59%). Issues related to soil and water conservation - conservation (56%), Landcare (49%), riparian (16%) and erosion (14%) - also scored highly (Table 2) suggesting that this may be an equally important driver. Notably, aesthetics was identified by 40% of respondents indicating that the look and feel of a forestry project may play a critical role in determining what stimulates farmer interest in tree growing generally and the criteria they might use when evaluating options.

Table 2. Purpose for establishing and managing trees and vegetation (n=225).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Percentage of respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Biodiversity</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shelter</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservation</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Landcare</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aesthetics</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investment</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riparian</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salinity</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erosion</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Firewood</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On farm timber</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water Table Control</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carbon</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Responses below 10% have been excluded from this table. Source: Reid and Deans (2009)

Deans (unpubl.) argues that the fact that most respondents highlighted multiple reasons for growing trees reflects a strong emphasis within the Australian Master TreeGrower course on multipurpose forestry design and management as a means of capturing opportunities and reducing risk. He also notes that this is one of a number of distinguishing features of the program when compared to other forestry extension initiatives. Deans also found that Master TreeGrowers do not consider forestry as an alternative land use. Rather, trees are seen as part of the farm’s infrastructure supporting the ecological integrity, agricultural productivity, capital value and social function of the whole farm package. In this respect, establishing a forest on a farm can be likened to constructing a shed or a fence, or purchasing a tractor (Deans unpubl.). This is in stark contrast with many forestry extension programs that present plantations as an alternative land use or advocate that plantations are *just another crop* (Jenkins 2004).

Deans found that participants who completed the course between 3 and 13 years ago still held the program in high esteem and greatly valued its techniques, information and ongoing support. Less than 9% of participants had any critical comment about the program, and of these, almost all still found the program valuable. Participants have retained and used the information they learnt in the program across time.

Deans concludes:

*The MTG program is an outstanding example of extension which: delivers technical and practical information across a broad range of subjects related to farm forestry; establishes formal and informal networks for the dissemination and testing of natural resource management ideas; creates human and social capital for positive landscape change; encourages landholders to make their own decisions about vegetation practices on their own land; maps an overlying structure onto a delivery model which is regional focussed; and balances landholder and community aspirations for natural resource management goals with adult learning principles to achieve its outcomes. Master TreeGrower participants enthusiastically support the program, increase vegetation*
planted on their own land after completing the course, are more inclined to plant vegetation for public good and relate to trees and vegetation inside a complex matrix of social, ecological and economic purposes. (Deans unpubl.)

Peer Group Mentoring as an extension tool to support forestry on farms

In 2005 the Otway Agroforestry Network (OAN) teamed up with the Australian Master TreeGrower Program to explore the concept of further enhancing and facilitating farmer-to-farmer extension. They proposed to train, then pay, experienced local tree growers to act as peer group mentors (PGMs) who would then support and assist other landholders. To date, twenty Otway landholders have acted as PGMs providing one-on-one support to more than 90 landholders. They have also been involved in running regional farm walks, representing the network at local meetings and contributing to regional newsletters.

Recognising the potential to extend the concept on the back of previous Master TreeGrower courses, we provided the Australian Sandalwood Network and Trees South-West (both in Western Australia) guidance in the development of PGM projects, helped deliver extension training for PGMs, contributed to technical sessions, provided funds to support training and delivery, and participated in workshops to evaluate the pilot projects.

The PGM concept clearly reflects many of the views expressed in a national review of the adoption of conservation practices (Pannell et al. 2006) which found that:
- social and informal networks are important influences on the decision to proceed to trial;
- the more difficult the decision, the more the decision maker will engage and re-engage with their personal support network;
- peer expectations of continued commitment or personal support and encouragement will reinforce commitment and provide a buffer against setbacks; and,
- we should expect that adoption behaviour is influenced by the personality of the decision maker, their social networks, personal circumstances and family situation.

One further quote from the same paper has particular resonance with the PGM concept:

*A history of respectful relationships between landholders and advocates for the innovation, including scientists, extension agents, other landholders and private companies, is positively related to adoption through enhanced trust in the advice of the advocates* (Pannell et al. 2006 p 1412).

Other extension researchers have highlighted the importance of peers in supporting adoption: Glendinning et al. (2001) found that Swedish farmers “checked with leading farmers and village leaders” when sourcing materials, checking for possible negative impacts and verifying claimed benefits. Phillips (1985) notes the important role that intimates and non-expert acquaintances, many of them being other farmers, had on the major decisions taken by dairy farmers in New Zealand (Figure 4). Whilst professionals or experts were effective at introducing new ideas and information to a farming community, Phillips found that they actually played a very minor role in critical aspects of innovation, validation and implementation support.
During their training, and again at the follow-up evaluation workshops, participants in the three pilot programs were given the opportunity to help articulate the purpose and value of a tree growing mentor program (quotes shown in italics were collected by the author or program managers). The mentors saw the role of the service as being to support landholders in ways that help them achieve their own land management goals:

**The key to mentoring is to assist the landholder to get where she/he wants to go.**

They agreed that, if recipients of the service chose not to establish or manage forests, it should not be seen as a failure. In fact, it might actually be good in that it saved them money and time and reduced the likelihood of unsatisfactory experiences:

**We are about cultural change – not just trees in the ground.**

There was clear recognition of the value of farmers learning from other landholders and many of the mentors believed they were already, because of their own tree activities, acting as mentors anyway. They recognised a potential contribution they themselves could make to building a collective of ideas and providing a localised experience for the client:

**It is a great way to encourage neighbours, friends and land managers in your own community to integrate trees for multiple benefits with their farming activities.**

As well as encouraging other farmers to see the potential for trees on their farms, the mentors also felt they had a role to play in sharing their concerns about the risks:
Using practising farm foresters to give examples and experiences in similar areas can save prospective practitioners a lot of time and money. Learning from others and seeing results can save a lot of heartache as well as giving inspiration.

Most mentors were quick to recognise that they did not need to be an expert in all aspects of tree growing. It was more important that the mentors recognised their role within the community as a source of knowledge that was gained from their involvement and practical experience in growing trees. In distinguishing mentors from experts there was no suggestion that they were inferior. In fact, the mentors recognised that they played an important role in validating (or dismissing) expert information provided in information sheets or presented at seminars and field days:

All land managers that I have been in contact with as part of the program have commented on the unique nature and innovative approach. They also appreciate that the mentor is not an ‘expert’ coming to tell them what they should be doing, but is someone they usually know and respect as having local experience in tree growing.

The critical starting point is for the mentors to meet the landholder(s) on their own property with a view to understanding their interests, needs and aspirations and providing them with a realistic picture of what can be done. Other types of activities identified as being appropriate for mentors included: hosting a tour of the mentor’s own property; taking the client to another farm or forest that they thought was relevant to their needs or interests; preparing tree orders or facilitating contractors; working directly with the landholder on the project (setting out fence lines, planting, pruning etc); doing some follow up research on behalf of the landholder; assisting with funding applications or arranging meetings with industry, government or other potential partners; establishing or conducting ongoing monitoring (photo points, growth measurements etc); organising landholders to attend group activities; and, organising and presenting at local farm walks, seminars or other group activities.

The rate of pay and the cost of mileage were negotiated within each group. Payment for time varies from $30 to $40 per hour with the mileage rate being based around local government or tax office rates. Interestingly, all projects have found that there are some mentors that are reluctant to submit invoices or are slow to complete their paperwork. More than one has expressed their uneasiness in charging for their time when they are enjoying themselves and not actually doing physical work.

Many mentors highlighted the satisfaction and positive feeling resulting from being recognised as having a contribution to make, being rewarded for the informal work they felt they were already doing in their community, having the opportunity to do something practical towards improving the landscape and supporting their community, and having the opportunity to contribute to helping a new industry succeed. They were doing something they themselves believed in and gained satisfaction from being able to help others:

It’s been a great opportunity and a privilege to contribute to rural revegetation, and to stimulate people to consider the positives of tree growing.

I believe that it gives each of us more credibility when talking to others about the tree planting idea, as we are identified as having done the hard yards and have done something others would like to but are hesitant without seeing it done first.
Mentors acknowledged the benefits they received through building their own knowledge, experience and information networks. Many identified that the privileged access the project provided them to so-called ‘super mentors’ was invaluable. They also acknowledge that the PGM service also fuelled their enthusiasm to manage and maintain their own projects. For many, the prospect of having other farmers visit their own farms was sufficient encouragement to prune their trees, control the weeds or expand their plantings.

_I have found the program of exceptional value to me personally, as I have limited knowledge and expertise in farm forestry. The concept of getting knowledge to the point that one can discuss issues with peers is a great learning experience._

_Interaction with like minded peers is always stimulating. Passing on experience to potential growers is rewarding to both parties._

_Rewarding to share knowledge and experience with new growers. Plus meeting and exchanging ideas with other group members has been a pleasure._

**Conclusions**

Farm forestry is different to industrial, corporate or public forestry because it involves farmers and farming communities. The Australian Master TreeGrower Program works with regional groups and agencies to develop and deliver a range of extension and education programs for farmers interested in the establishment and management of trees for conservation and profit. Whilst the 8-day regional education course is the flagship of the program, the Australian Master TreeGrower Program is also involved in developing peer group mentoring programs, hosting or contributing to field days and conferences, delivering refresher courses in technical aspects of tree establishment and management, and the provision of advice over the phone or via email.

Both independent and internal reviews of the Australian Master TreeGrower course and the Peer Group Mentoring service demonstrate that these participatory extension tools are effective in engaging landholders in the design and development of new forests and in improving the management of existing forests on farms. The concurrence of private and public aspirations inherent in the majority of forestry projects undertaken by participants suggests the Master TreeGrower Program is also delivering real public benefits to the wider community.

**Acknowledgements**

The author would like to acknowledge the many hundreds of individuals who have contributed to the development of the Australian Master TreeGrower Program since 1996. This includes landholders, tree growers, extension agents, nursery owners, contractors, sawmillers, extension agents and government officers and the many regional, state and federal government agencies or community and industry organisations they may work for. The program could not have been conducted without the financial support of the Myer Foundation, the Joint Venture Agroforestry Program, Land and Water Australia and The University of Melbourne. Personally, I would like to thank Professor Ian Ferguson, Dr. Tim O’Meara, Peter Stephen, Wayne Deans, Andrew Stewart, Richard Moore, Annabel Kater, Jim Donaldson and
David Jenkins who, amongst many others, have been such great supporters of the Australian Master TreeGrower Program over the years.

References

Deans, W. (Unpubl.) The Australian Master TreeGrower Program II. The impact and value of a national agroforestry extension program.


