

THE AUSTRALIAN

Seed crops in FNQ helping overseas farmers, grow to big business

SUE NEALES THE AUSTRALIAN JULY 23, 2015 12:00AM



'It's an exciting way to farm': Maryanne Salvetti in her Atherton Tablelands chia. Picture: Brian Cassey Source: News Corp Australia

Maryanne Salvetti is used to strangers stopping in amazement outside her family farm on the Atherton Tablelands in far north Queensland, confused about the unfamiliar crops growing in her front paddock.

It's not surprising, because most of the 25 different crops grown by Salvetti Farming on its three properties near Mareeba are unique in Australia and are only grown on its farms.

The family business, run by Maryanne, husband Dennis, and their three adult children, Jason, Steven and Debbie, is a leader in the fast-growing seed industry: a high-value niche sector for which Australia is quickly gaining a specialist reputation.

Relatively remote parts of Australia, such as Tasmania, the Ord irrigation area in Western Australia's East Kimberley, and far north Queensland, are particularly suited to seed production because they are isolated from other crops, and have low levels of pest- and soil-borne diseases.

While global companies such as Dutch Bejo Seeds are harvesting premium vegetable seeds such as carrots, cauliflower and beetroot from Tasmania's rich red soils for European and North American farmers to sow, north Queensland is growing tropical crops for farmers in the Pacific, Africa, South America and India to use.

Ms Salvetti delights in the rare grass and legume crops with strange names such as desmodium, rongai dolichos, Gatton Panic, stylo and Rhodes grass on her farm, which are allowed to flower and their seeds to dry off before being carefully harvested.

After being dried and cleaned in the Salvettis' specially licensed seed-processing shed, the sacks of valuable seeds are sold under contract to specialist companies for sale overseas.

The desmodium seed is dispatched to Africa, where it is grown by cattle farmers for dairy cows to graze; the Gatton Panic grass seed is grown under avocado trees; and the rongai dolichos seeds sold for South American farmers to produce beans that will become cattle feed and green manure.

"It's an exciting way to farm; it always keeps you interested when you try to farm these new crops that no one has ever grown before in Australia," laughs Ms Salvetti.

"Our neighbours are always asking what on earth we have in the front paddock; funnily enough, while most are seeds for crops for overseas farmers in undeveloped parts of the world to grow, a lot have been bred in Australia through CSIRO as part of our aid development programs."

Now Ms Salvetti has moved into branded food production. The family's first large crop of chia, a popular health food not grown before in tropical north Queensland, is being harvested from their irrigated Tolga farm, and sold to retailers, wholesalers and health bar manufacturers under their own brand, Australian Superfoods NQ.

The Salvettis believed there was a niche for independently grown chia to be marketed and sold within Australia — a punt that so far is proving correct.

"It's about our family wanting to take our food and crops right from the farm direct to the people," Ms Salvetti says, inspecting their flowering 50 hectares of chia grown chemical-free under overhead pivot irrigators.

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