
Flower power, 50 years on

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Charlie Rudduck was very much a 'flower' person. He also knew all about 'potent plant extracts'. But Charlie Rudduck was definitely not an early day hippie.

Back in 1914, Charlie would have been counted among the Empire's boldest, bravest, and most loyal young gentlemen, on whom the 'drop out', 'make love not war' messages of the 1970s flower children would have either been lost or rejected out of hand.

Before the 'Great War', Charlie, an agricultural scientist (Ed's note: the very best kind!), founded and gave his name to one of Victoria's earliest pest industry suppliers.

Today, of course, C Rudduck Pty Ltd (known mainly as just Rudducks) is still going very strong as Victoria's member of the national Pest Link group of distributors.

When hostilities broke out Charlie joined the Air Corps in England and spent much of his war time in fabric covered, wooden framed bi-planes getting up the noses of his German opponents.

On his return to the business after the war, Charlie quickly recognised the potential for natural pyrethrum as an insecticide which not only had tremendous insect killing power but, also, safety (especially compared with many of the heavy duty pesticides being used at the time!).

From an early stage, and ever since, natural pyrethrum has played a significant role in the Rudducks' portfolio.

Initially, much of Rudducks' business involved supplying Australia's defence forces with chemicals and spray equipment. To this day Rudducks still supplies natural pyrethrum products to the Army, RAAF and Navy.

From the 1950s, Rudducks sourced its pyrethrum from the world's only commercial source: Kenya.

Today, the Pyrethrum Board of Kenya still controls the manufacture and distribution of all Kenyan natural pyrethrum.

Until the recent increase in cultivation and manufacture in Tasmania, Kenya was the worlds biggest producer of natural pyrethrum.

Over the years, and especially through the late 1980s and 1990s, Kenya's biggest problem has been consistency of supply. Over the last decade, the availability of pyrethrum fluctuated wildly.

Pyrethrum flowers twice a year in Kenya. This gives Kenyan farmers two opportunities each year to work out, based on current levels of demand and price, whether or not to plant a crop or put in something else which appeared more attractive.

The Kenyan farmers became infamous for their tendency to change crops 'at the drop of a hat' and upset the world supply of natural pyrethrum product.

For Australian users of pyrethrum, the biggest problem they faced was not knowing if companies like Rudducks could supply their needs. While they always tried hard to find alternative sources, sometimes they had no choice but to say, "Sorry, we can't help."

The past two years, however, have seen a major shift back towards certainty and security of supply, as well as consistent quality. The reason is that the crop is now being grown, literally, in our home garden, in plentiful supply, in the near perfect conditions provided by northern Tasmania. It is also being professionally manufactured and managed by Botanical Resources Australia (BRA), which has committed to the product indefinitely.

The Tasmanian experiment was started by CIG Gases (now BOC Gases) about 20 years ago.

Back then, CIG had developed a couple of CO₂ charged pyrethrum products ('Pestigas' being one) but were becoming more than frustrated by the fluctuating supply of product from Kenya.

With hundreds of automatic Pestigas systems installed in food manufacturing and storage plants, any cuts to their pyrethrum supply meant customers all of a sudden getting into in huge trouble with insects.

During the 1980s, many companies actually closed down their Pestigas systems and reverted to buying Py Fog (applied using thermal foggers such as the German Swingfog) from Rudducks.

In the meantime, CIG ploughed a lot of time and money into the Tasmanian crop, confident that they could solve their pyrethrum shortage problems by growing their own crop.

This venture gained a lot of publicity at the time and Rudducks tried hard to convince CIG to expand their operation so it and its customers could also gain access to the Aussie product.

As it turned out, however, CIG was not able to efficiently process the resin from the pyrethrum flowers so they were forced to ship raw flowers to the USA for refinement.

When they first started to do this, worldwide demand for pyrethrum was huge and prices so high that, rather than ship refined product back to Australia, CIG decided to sell it on the world market direct from the US refinery.

It was not till the 1990s that CIG (by then becoming known as BOC) built its own mill/refinement plant and started to process the product in Tassie. But by this time BOC had tied up many long term contracts and was committed to selling the product overseas well into the future. In fact, they knew that they could always sell every drop they produced.

In 1996 BOC's pyrethrum operation was purchased by the people operating the processing plant in a management buyout. The team, headed up by Ian Folder, who had been running the project for years, took ownership and formed Botanical Resources Australia.

The rest, as they say, is history and, as the ABC's resident (Tasmanian) gardener would say, "Here in Tasmania, there are bloomin' daisies bloomin' everywhere! And aren't they just bloomin' marv'luss".