

# Protea hobby turns a profit

By SARAH DENT

DAVID and Andrew Mathews have built their father's retirement hobby into a profitable export business.

A two-hectare plot of proteas established in 1974 has been expanded to eight hectares, export markets have been developed and new hybrids trialed.

The brothers, who run the Proteoflora business from Monbulk, aim to triple exports of potted plants in the next three years.

They export 30 per cent of their cut flowers to Japan, which is worth more than \$50,000 a year.

Andrew said they could only export cut flowers profitably for about half the year because of varying

returns. "For example, if we received 60 cents for a protea head in Melbourne, we would need three times that price to be able to export to Europe profitably," he said.

Andrew said transportation risks reduced incentives to export perishable products.

He said flowers were lost or damaged, shipments delayed, shipping space cancelled and boxes were left in the sun.

"If someone comes along with lobsters to export and they are willing to pay more per kilogram, then they get the space, regardless of whether we have booked," Andrew said.

"This happens about twice a year.

The Japanese are also particular about insects.

If one insect is found on a shipment, they fumigate all the flowers — at the grower's expense — and then label the flowers second class. About one in 12 shipments have to be fumigated.

Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Korea and Malaysia have also shown interest in obtaining Australian proteas.

David and Andrew grow more than 200 protea varieties on red volcanic clay and have developed many of their own hybrids.

The potted plants are supplied to garden centres, nurseries and landscapers. About 20 per cent of nursery stock is grown undercover.

"Australia's nursery expertise exceeds that of the US and ours is also much more advanced than in

Japan," Andrew said. "We are still behind Holland, but they are having a lot of trouble with proteas because of snow."

Flower Export Council of Australia executive officer Kim James advised protea growers to group together to share production knowledge, marketing expertise and shipment costs.

He said transportation risks and costs would be reduced if more flowers were shipped together.

"There would only need to be one set of export documents, one packing shed with appropriate quality standards and growers would pay less for transport if they worked together."

Mr James said only the eastern states were affiliated in a national organis-

ation, with Western Australia still on its own.

"If the states joined a national body the industry would have a stronger voice and could address things like leaf blackening, which the overseas market is concerned about," he said.

*The Weekly Times, April 10, 1986*