

Boom out of tragedy

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Pesticide drift wrecked their business, but the Dudleys fought back, writes **Gill Vowles**

WHEN herbicide drift destroyed 20 years of breeding work, flower growers Corrie and John Dudley thought their international success story was over.

However, two years later the Elizabeth Town couple are winning back export markets and are famous in Japan for their rare hellebore species.

"Japan is our biggest market as the hellebore appeals to the Japanese aesthetic," Mr Dudley said.

"Even though our tiny nursery is stuck in the middle of nowhere, we have a constant parade of Japanese visitors."

And it was one of those visitors who revealed the Dudleys' status after insisting on taking their photograph with his new \$12,000 camera.

"He told me he'd bought the camera specifically to take that photo because we were famous in his country," Mr Dudley said.

Becoming Japanese superstars was far from the Dudleys' minds when they turned their hobby of breeding hellebores into a business nine years ago.

"I was inspired by the philosophy of clean-green cleverness and thought with the internet anything was possible," Mr Dudley said.

"We decided to specialise in hybrid species and the business grew like topsy."

By 2007 the Dudleys were producing six kilos of seeds, about 500,000, annually with all stock wholesaled in Japan, Europe, America and Britain.

"We'd built up a highly successful microbusiness, had gained respect in the industry and our production was growing each year," Mr Dudley said.

Then came the savage blow which destroyed their decades of work.

"One morning, out of nowhere, a cloud of 2,4-D, a highly volatile herbicide used to kill broadleaf weeds, drifted over the nursery," Mr Dudley said.

"A month later a second cloud descended and did even more damage."

"We lost the majority of our plants and without seed we lost our wholesale markets — economically it ruined us."

Mr Dudley said the Department of Primary Industries, Parks, Water and Environment did not take their complaints seriously.

"For the first year we were full of anger and consumed with feeling sorry for ourselves," he said.

"Then we realised that was getting us nowhere and ultimately it was up to us to do something about our situation."

"We still had our skills and some genetic material so we decided to start again."

Mr Dudley said the destruction of most of their stock accelerated the breeding of new varieties.

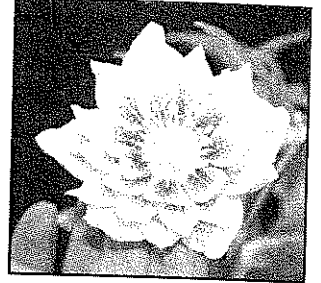
"Some of these have been so enthusiastically accepted into the market we won't be able to satisfy demand for the next two years."

"So in many ways we're doing better than ever."

However they live with the constant threat of another herbicide drift and believe the Government should review legislation to minimise risks.

"At the moment farmers who spray aren't obliged to tell neighbouring landowners unless the land adjoins and that needs to change," Mr Dudley said.

"We also need much more rigorous training of people permitted to spray."



BEAUTY: Hellebore flowers are prized by the Japanese.