

# Nursery Papers

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## Gardening: A modern-day oasis?

The *Ipsos Mackay Report* is Australia's longest-running program of social research. Founded by noted social researcher and commentator, Hugh Mackay, the report helps marketers and retailers understand the mind and the mood of the Australian consumer.

In this month's *Nursery Papers*, the principle author of the Ipsos Mackay Report, Randall Pearce, summarises the 9th annual 'Mind and Mood' report, which paints a picture of an Australian community which is "rougher, tougher, more competitive and less compassionate", and proposes that gardens and gardening can have an increasingly calming effect on an already-frenzied world.

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## Gardening: A modern-day oasis in a frenzied world

### 'Borrowing' trust – the Ipsos Mackay method

The *Ipsos Mackay Report* is based on the **listening method**. Ipsos researchers fan out across Australia to listen to Australians chatting with friends, neighbours and workmates in the relaxed environment of their natural habitat (homes, clubs, and workplaces). This method of research through discussion with trusted peers in a comfortable setting encourages participants to focus upon and explore issues

within a topic that are of interest and concern to them. This approach harnesses the dynamics of spontaneous interactions between people who already know and trust one another. The research 'borrows' that trust.

The fieldwork for 'Mind and Mood' was composed of sixteen such group discussions with Australian men and women ranging in age from mid-20s to mid-60s in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Canberra, Geelong, Goulburn and Wollongong.



Gardening can offer peace and calm in a modern chaotic world.

### Gardening can have a calming effect on our frenzied world

In spite of the many signs of personal optimism and buoyancy as a result of a decade or more of increasing economic prosperity, there is a sense, just under the surface, that something is not quite right in the community. It has been a recurring theme in this research project over the past five years or so: Australians consistently report higher levels of anxiety, irritability, grumpiness – all associated with what is assumed to be a rising level of tension in the community. By understanding the cultural landscape of contemporary Australia we can look for ways of reducing that tension. Gardens and gardening may offer one of the few antidotes to a community so frenzied.

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Australians are beginning to see their own spaces, including their gardens, in a new light. The trend is towards hassle-free holidays in your 'own backyard', whether this be your own city, town or garden.

“When I pass young people on the footpath, I’m the one who has to step aside to let them pass. They never consider others, and people don’t stand up for older people on public transport any more.”

## Lashing out at the world

While the comment above is directed at today’s youth, the underlying complaint could apply equally to any group, irrespective of age, gender, colour or background. Is there something wrong with people today, or is it something wrong with the world in which we live?

It is in Australians’ changed reactions to this heightened tension that we can sense a departure from findings in prior years. Whereas previous ‘Mind and Mood’ studies have reported a tendency to ‘switch off, shut down, curl up (and retreat into the

backyard)’, these days we seem more prepared to ‘lash out’ at a world which is seen to be ‘rougher, tougher, more competitive and less compassionate’. We can see the signs of rising grumpiness everywhere, from schoolyard and workplace bullying to road rage and even (in your own back lot) shopping trolley rage. It is hardly surprising that Australians are feeling on edge given the ‘state of the world’ and the rapidly accelerating pace of daily life. In this environment, manner and morals are the first to go. There is a pervasive sense that Australians are less trustworthy, less courteous, more reckless and more irresponsible than they used to be.

## Understanding why your customers can be so grumpy

So how do we respond as retailers to the snarly consumers of today? First, we begin by understanding the ‘big picture’ and ensuring that our operations provide an antidote to the ‘frazzled’ Australian consumer. Consumers are seeking relief from bad news even while they have a voracious appetite for it. Advertising, marketing and retail strategies should respond to the growing need for personal comfort, personal security and the kind of indulgence that works as an insulator. In this context, one can think of few things that are more reassuring than the comfort of one’s own backyard.

While we might be prepared to ‘lash out’ or whinge at home, we are more reluctant to engage with the world beyond our shores. Reports of alleged Australian drug traffickers caught in Indonesia have ‘spooked’ Australians even more than a potential terrorist threat. The stories of Schapelle Corby and the Bali Nine heighten our tension precisely because we normally associate Bali with stress release. In this climate, Australians may be receptive to appeals to ‘relax at home’ and to see Australia first, including Australia’s gardens.



Caught up in the rapidly accelerating pace of daily life, its no wonder that so many Australians see each other as less trustworthy and courteous than they used to be.

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“You do get fantastic ideas from some of those programs about home renovations. There’s a lot of stuff we could change if we had the money.”

## Key Point

The world beyond Australian shores seems to be more hostile and intimidating today. Recent reports of alleged Australian drug traffickers caught in Indonesia have ‘spooked’ Australians even more than potential terrorist threats. These media-hyped stories force Australians to acknowledge ‘there are dark forces and bad people out there’.

## Implications

In the current climate, there exists the potential to reinforce and capitalise on the popular idea that we should ‘see Australia first’. Overseas destinations are increasingly clouded by travellers’ fear of being ‘caught up’ and ‘victimised’ in an international web of crime.

- Make gardens enticing. Gardens are a personal sanctuary or retreat from the outside world. Consumers are seeking relief from bad news – marketing strategies should focus on offering personal comfort and security to customers.
- Australians are beginning to see their own spaces, including their gardens, in a new light. Work with this trend. Promote hassle-free holidays in your ‘own backyard’, whether this be the Australian outback, your own city or town, or even a relaxing break at home in the garden with loved ones. The potential to market garden tours has rarely been so promising!
- Encourage indulgence in ‘comfort plants’ – this is much healthier for the body and soul than ‘comfort food’!

## The influence of media

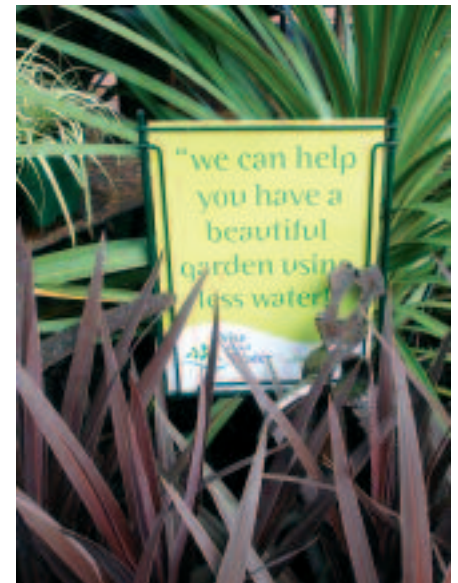
As life becomes more demanding and the world more threatening, media escape becomes more welcome. Contrary to popular belief, the Hollywood blockbuster and free-to-air television are alive and well. Although much of the discussion on which this research was based consisted of rather bleak complaints, the conversation often came alive when people talked about their favourite television programs or the hottest new movie they had seen. So stark was the contrast in energy levels between discussion of media content and discussion of ‘my life’ that it would seem that the capacity of the media to ‘take us out of ourselves’ is more highly valued than ever.

The ‘lifestyle’ TV phenomenon (Hello, Jamie Durie!) has given us permission to narrow our focus and to disengage from the larger political and social agenda. Although ratings may be waning for some lifestyle TV programs (Goodbye, Burke’s Backyard...) the genre has had a huge impact on Australians’ attitudes and values. Lifestyle programs:

- Reinforce the current tendency to turn the focus inward
- Direct our concentration to ‘our own backyards’, and
- Position the ‘home and garden’ in our minds as a creative expression of the self.

## Too many choices, not enough information

While runaway consumerism may be pinpointed as one of the causes of our current malaise, consumerist society contributes its own tensions to the mind and mood of the Australian consumer. Though Australians worship at the altar of



**Advertising, marketing and retail strategies should respond to the growing need for comfort, guidance and the kind of indulgence that works as an insulator.**

‘freedom of choice’, they sometimes wonder whether there is more choice than is reasonable or healthy. ‘Freedom to choose’ doesn’t feel like freedom if we don’t have enough information to guide confident choices. In a previous *Ipsos Mackay Report* entitled “How Do We Choose?” (Report no. 113, September 2004), consumers reported feelings of anxiety, stress and confusion associated with the proliferation of consumer choices they must make. Just compare the number of fertilisers and weed killers on offer today in comparison to your parent’s time.

“I suppose life must have been simpler for our grandparents. They didn’t have as much choice as we do, but they don’t seem any less happy than us.”

In an ‘information age’, a paradox is emerging whereby consumers seem to be suffering a lack of information about available options, which in turn makes the process of choosing overwhelming. Education can act as a powerful

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counterweight to consumers' feelings of confusion. In-store demonstrations, gardening courses, brochures or websites can all help lower consumers' anxiety about making the right purchase for the garden. This sort of assistance is particularly appreciated by young adults now living away from their most frequent source of advice on gardens – parents.

## Key Point

Though Australians worship at the altar of 'freedom of choice', they sometimes wonder if there is more choice than is reasonable or healthy. Consumers often feel overwhelmed or confused because they do not receive enough education or guidance to feel capable of making the right or wise choice.

## Implication

While science may make gardening 'easier' than it used to be, choosing the right solution can be more perplexing.

- Knowledge is power – empower customers and make choosing easy by educating the customer
- Personalised advice on what to plant, when to plant and how to maintain the garden, will be particularly appreciated
- In-store demonstrations, gardening courses, brochures or websites can provide excellent guidance to consumer's trying to find what's right for *them*
- Keep up-to-date with media and fashion – educating customers also means not falling behind in the latest trends!

## Connecting in a frenzied world

At the very time when people feel as if they need the emotional security of a family more than ever families are breaking down in near record numbers. But when people find themselves isolated from traditional family connections, friendship circles become correspondingly more important (think gardening clubs and neighbourhood clean-up projects). This is the era of the surrogate extended family, in which we are learning to make strong emotional connections with people whose role in our lives may be transient, but who provide a precious resource for us to draw on at times of stress and difficulty. It is for this reason that our best protection against feelings of insecurity and anxiety is not to turn our houses into fortresses, but to forge links with the neighbourhood.

If gardens and gardening are to offer some antidote to our frenzied world,



**Cut through the confusion! Educate your customers and inspire their choices.**

perhaps the best first step is for gardeners to reach a helping hand across a neighbour's fence.



**Gardens are a place to reconnect in a world where people can often feel isolated from family, friends and colleagues.**

## Acknowledgements

Randall Pearce is the principle author of the Ipsos Mackay Report. The Ipsos Mackay Report is Australia's longest-running program of social research. Founded by noted social researcher and commentator, Hugh Mackay, the report investigates social trends to deliver consumer insights that help marketers and retailers understand the 'big picture' of the mind and the mood of the Australian consumer.

This *Nursery Paper* was compiled and edited by Inga Ting, NGIA Publications and Web Coordinator.