

## WW | Rural Women's Awards

**MARTHA SHEPHERD** Rainforest fruit grower, Cooroy, Queensland.  
After 35 years in the international food industry, Martha Shepherd was tired of travel, stress and seeing more hotels than her own home. She wanted a change.

"We both loved the idea of small-scale farming, but we knew we needed to be able to make a living from it," Martha explains. Yet, unlike so many mid-life seachangers who plunge romantically into the unknown, Martha, 55, and her partner, actor and musician David Haviland, 66, did painstaking research before tossing in their careers for a new life.

At the time, Martha, born in Michigan in the US, was director of international operations for Mrs Fields Famous Brands, based in Australia. She knew a lot about product research and development of bakery, frozen desserts and confectionery, but not much about farming.

Although David had studied agriculture in his youth, they both decided to enrol in a TAFE course to learn more about native plants. "We got more than we bargained for," Martha says, laughing. The lecturer was passionate about native fruits and nuts. "He exposed us to fantastic new flavours and textures. David and I were inspired."

In 1997, they pooled their finances and bought 4.5 hectares of old dairy land at Cooroy, 20km from Noosa in the Sunshine Coast hinterland. They called it Galeru, which is Aboriginal for the rainbow serpent who "unleashed his colourful tail, bringing rain to seed the land with life".

David began planting two rainforest fruit trees – lilly pilly varieties called *syzygium luehmannii* and *syzygium fibrosum*, aiming to develop a high-value niche crop, in other words, high prices for small quantities because of market rarity.

Martha knew her first hurdle was to come up with a catchy name for her fruit.

"Lilly pilly didn't mean anything in the marketplace, so we called the fruit from *fibrosum* 'raincherry' and the fruit from *luehmannii* 'rainberry'."

By 2003, Martha and David were ready for the marketplace and Martha quit her job. What she didn't realise was that they had kicked off a whole new industry.

"Customers were thrilled to see the products from native fruits and wanted to know how to grow the trees," Martha says. "We were so inundated with requests, we held a field day and 65 people turned up!"

The result was a network of small farms in the area, growing fruit which they hoped to sell to Martha. "Sounds good, doesn't it? But David and I are not young and we're just little guys, so the thought of launching into a massive amount of funding to absorb crops from other farms scared us to death."

Yet Martha saw potential everywhere – to support local farmers and food producers and perhaps, one day, even to supply a lucrative export market.

She began looking for a way that smaller fruit growers could join regional food processors to make quality products in large enough quantities to be viable. Eventually, she met Associate Professor Ray Collins at the University of Queensland, Gatton, who told her about a "value chain model".

"It's a new concept in farming, a collaboration of growers with processors and retailers," Martha explains. "The aim is to focus on the value of the retail product and to agree on how that value is assigned – how much the growing, processing and distribution is worth."

"The result is that you get a group of small businesses able to compete on a bigger scale, at a cost structure they wouldn't normally be able to achieve. In effect, although we all team up, we remain independent businesses – no co-operatives, no partnerships."

Martha believes that if the scheme is successful, it will benefit small rural producers and solve a problem in agriculture – the efficient use of small parcels of land. "If we can be a model to show how to make a living from small farms, then we'll have achieved something worthwhile," she says. >>>

They are smart, tough, capable and creative – and passionate about the wide brown land they call home. They are the seven winners of this year's Rural Women's Awards, sponsored by The Australian Women's Weekly and the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation, and are leading the way with new ideas to keep our rural communities thriving, writes Susan Duncan.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY RUSSELL SHAKESPEARE

# Best in the

