IT DOESN’T seem that long ago when canola was unheard of. Then there was that first spring of driving through stunning carpet fields of canola throughout the Great Southern and thinking, where have you been all my life?

Now the canola landscapes are taken for granted, as well as signifying the change of seasons. The increase in temperature coincides with a proliferation of tourists and events, a sense of optimism in the air and people literally having a spring in their step.

This edition is again an eclectic mix of individuals, groups, not-for-profit organisations and government agencies utilizing their passion and cutting edge technology to further cement the Great Southern as one of the leading and most natural food bowl in the world.

I never lose of the incredible stories of loc-als using innovative best-practice methods and it’s something we should all be proud of. 

Ian Beach Editor

5 Rain of Terror

3 Medicinal Mushies

From the ground up

4 Hi-tech Farming

Sheep systems

5 Rain of Terror

Harvesting affected

6 Crossing Borders

Lending a helping hand

From the Ashes

Wildflower rehabilitation

10 Flourishing Flora

Flowers for all

12 Apple Turnover

Every homeowner

14 Wild Oats

Bread for resistance

15 Using your noodles

Celebrating export anniversary

Medicinal Mushies

WHEN Graham Upson started growing commercial mushrooms 43 years ago, the biggest challenge was there was no-one to advise him on how to go about it.

“It took us years to master the intricacies of every aspect of the growing process,” he said.

“Now the fascination with all things fungus-related still dominates our everyday activities.”

“A lifetime of mycological study places us in a strong position to provide the range of mushrooms and service to all the mushroom lovers.”

Mr Upson said in regard to technology, cultivating mushrooms required not only knowledge of the growing process, but it’s assisted by technological devices such as temperature control, humidity, air flow and carbon dioxide control – all possible with computerisation.

He said mushroom growing was one of the most efficient industries there was, taking raw materials and turning them into a food.

“The base raw product from our process is from other industries and turning them into a food is an efficient industry there was and it’s assisted by technological devices such as temperature control, humidity, air flow and carbon dioxide control – all possible with computerisation.”

Mr Upson said the Great Southern, with its naturally cool and slightly high humidity, suits the base raw product from our process is from other industries and turning them into a food.

“Hygiene is constantly on our mind which is required to produce consistent quality crops. Yields also suffer if raw materials and spawn from our laboratory is not up to standard.”

Mr Upson forecast positivity for Touchwood Mushrooms going forward.

“We produce a high-quality, unique product that has so many beneficial health benefits which people are now beginning to understand – that we have a naturally produced answer for many of the world’s health issues,” he said.

Mr Upson said the Great Southern, with its naturally cool and slightly high humidity, suits growing mushrooms.

“There is nowhere better than the south coast,” he said.

Words: Ian Beach

Great Southern

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THE WA Producers’ Co-operative (WAPC) held its first practical on-farm sheep technology workshop for members recently at Moorna Farm in Kojaneerup South.

The WAPC workshop focused on the use of new digital technology to improve sheep yields.

The WAPC was launched in February this year as a major new initiative instigated by the Stirlings to Coast Farmers group. The new Co-operative is now operational and has attracted a lot of interest from farmers who are looking to join as shareholders and active members.

The WAPC workshop was all about the practical use of new digital tools and equipment with demonstrations held live in the Moorna sheep yards. WAPC CEO Dr Christine Kershaw provided a progress update on the new Co-operative for members.

The program included presentations from Sandy Forbes (Rostock S&W&W and White Stud), a WAPC Board Director.

Ms Forbes spoke about how sheep data can help farmers to select better performing sheep but using Australian Sheep Breeding Values to improve production efficiencies and meat quality.

“Dr Kershaw said the workshop was the first of a series planned for Co-op members, bringing in a new age of technology to farmers and working in collaboration with processors.

“This is a significant difference in the way sheep are sold in WA, where we are aiming to be paid on ‘yield’ and quality rather than just weight and volume,” she said.

This shift in practice lends into another of the Co-op’s current projects, which is to develop a digital supply chain and underpin it with a digitally tracked high-value WA meat products into Asia over the next ten years.

Dr Kershaw said the Co-op members were looking at entering high-value markets in Asia.

“There are middle class markets in Asian countries who are eating more red meat and want to know where the products come from,” she said.

And with a beautiful but underutilised food bowl in our region with a natural climate that is particularly good for livestock production.

“It’s up there with the best of other regions but it’s not dependent upon irrigation, so it’s more natural.”

Dr Kershaw said the Co-op was assisting members with new technologies such as individual animal management through the use of electronic ear tags, making farmers more accountable to consumers and processors.

“We’re also looking at using out-of-specification grain to feed sheep to create a year-round supply of lamb, not just seasonal supply, which is what we currently have,” she said.

“If we get this right, we will be opening up fantastic new market opportunities for our members at the same time as helping them to improve their on-farm efficiencies and work together collaboratively, so that everyone gets a better return for their businesses. We expect the trial shipments to commence in early 2020 and to have the Co-op fully operational within three years.”

WEATHER conditions from September have put a damper on the harvest season for the Great Southern with the Grain Industry Association of Western Australia (GIIWA) predicting a less than average season.

During the 2018-19 season, Cooperative Bulk Handling (CBH) Albany Zone received around 2.7 million tonnes of grain during harvest, with the zone CBH total receiving 16 million.

GIIWA believes that due to a mixture of warm, dry conditions and snap frosts in August and September, it will be unlikely that Western Australian grain production will exceed 12.5 million tonnes for all crops, a deficit of 3.5 million tonnes.

Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development Officer Ben Foster said soil moisture had been declining due to a combination of patchy rainfall as well as crop and pasture water use.

“Seasonal rainfall outlooks from Australian and international models indicate October to December rainfall is likely to be below normal in much of southern WA,” he said.

Mr Foster said in early September much of the Great Southern experienced a series of frosts events that severely affected cropping areas.

According to a GIIWA Drop Report, the CBH Albany Zone will have hand yields with areas to the west predicted to have higher yields.

“The region seems to have escaped most of the frost that has affected crops further south and east,” the report stated.

“These western higher rainfall zones of the state are going to carry the load in grain production this year and are the only areas where crops can exceed grain yields.”

The report states that the rest of the Albany Zone, the South and East regions, have not fared well.

The GIIWA report says that in a perfect world, if the area received some much-needed rainfall at the end of August, harvest yields may have been pushed to the 15 million tonne mark.

As it stands, GIIWA predicts Albany Zone will have 300,000 tonnes of barley, 1.25 million tonnes of canola, 320,000 tonnes of oats, 260,000 tonnes of lentils and 46,000 tonnes of lupins and 5500 tonnes of pulses.

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FARMERS Across Borders began in 2014 when two Esperance farmers, Sam Starcevich and Anne Bell, decided they wanted to help out farmers affected by drought in New South Wales. That April, 16 road trains full of donated hay from Esperance made the delivery to Bourke in NSW. When coverage of the drought came up in 2018, they knew they had to go again. The idea was to have a similar event to the 2014 run, but it very quickly grew and soon they had close to 50 trucks and 3500 bales of hay lined up to head over to Cobar in Western NSW.

Thirty trucks departed from Esperance on the morning of January 22 and met with a further 17 road trains in Norseman for the night.

The next day was eventful. crossing the Nullarbor in temperatures soaring above 30 degrees. All 48 trucks left Norseman in the morning to begin the drive to Eucla. With a few stops to blow out radiators, suck on melted icey-poles at Mundrabilla, and the loss of one truck to fire in the high temperatures, they were all keen to get to Eucla and jump in the pool.

The trek continued through the SA hills to Broken Hill with temperatures still soaring.

The morning of Australia Day, all 47 road trains and five support vehicles left Broken Hill through a sea of supporters holding signs and waving. Coming into Cobar, they met with 20 more trucks from Victoria running with Lions Need for Feed.

Overall, 300 farmers in a 500km radius of Cobar were assisted. It was an amazing trip for all involved.

Going forward, the organisation hopes to continue delivering hay and feed simply because they care. They are currently taking expressions of interest for donated hay and straw, as well as donated barley rows straight out of the back of your header. If you’re interested in fundraising, sponsoring or donating, or just buying merchandise, go to www.farmersacrossborders.com.au or email farmersacrossborders@gmail.com

Words: Ian Beeck

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A GOSN’s determination to make his father feel safe and happy in his home again after it was ravaged by bushfire was the driving force behind a large-scale wildflower rehabilitation project in Porongurup.

The results of the project, spread across four hectares of the 44-hectare Thorn’s Mountain Retreat property, are on full display at the moment in time for this year’s Bloom Festival.

But the stunning show of colours and greenery was a long time in the making.

Let’s wind back the clock.

In the 1940s, Peter was climbing with friends in this area. Michael Thorn, co-owner and son of co-owner Peter Thorn of Thorn’s Mountain Retreats, said:

“Michael said, ‘why don’t we consider a re-vegetation project in Porongurup’.

We spent all of our childhood here and the whole family got a real feel for the area.

But it wasn’t all sunshine and lollipops living on this picturesque property.

So, we built the current house and the wine cellar – Dad from the Swan Valley and liked the romance of a vineyard – and the idea for the project came into the equation.

The new revegetation efforts.

Peter almost died from pneumonia because it was so cold down there.

“Peter and Lesley lived in the pioneer cottage,” Michael said.

“Now who would think that they were able to live there.

Peter died from bowel cancer.

“One was too fast,” Michael said.

“It was just tragic.

Dad was then on his own with this large property, wondering what to do with his life, so I came here in 2001 to help out and keep the cottages open.

Despite building everything up again, tragedy struck for a second time.

“Peter died aged 97,” Michael said.

“It was 2007, February 13. Peter’s birthday.

He was fine started in the afternoon and raced up the range ...

I estimated the flames were 4000 high.

It was massive.

Fortunately, I had time to get the place organised regarding the fire so we just saved all of the buildings, but 100 per cent of the property burnt out.

Watching Karri tree crowns igniting... it was a horrible thing to see.

Heartbreak after heartbreak was proving too much for Peter.

“He said he just didn’t think he could live here anymore. Michael said.

The vineyard was burnt... everything was black.

So I asked him, why don’t we consider a revegetation and rehabilitation project?

“So we did just that with Oyster Harbour Catchment Group.

If you thought this story couldn’t get any wilder, think again.

A selection of the property was so successfully rehabilitated with the planting of hundreds of wildflowers, it became a secondary business.

The humble tea tree had already been growing on the property but was now flourishing with the new revegetation efforts.

So much so that just three years after the devastating bushfire, WA Wildflower Exporters approached the Thorn family with a proposition to buy all of their tea tree.

“We made very fine bunches of tea tree – it was just a family-run operation so very minimal – and we’d put it into boxes, take it to Mount Barker, load them on a truck and send them off,” Michael said.

Then with the whole crocked thing – one of the reasons Peter bought this piece of land in the first place – we play four or five games a year and Clinton North from Wembley played and saw our tea tree.

And said ‘it looks like everything we could give to him."

“I said, wow, really?"

“This was in mid-October so the [flowering] season only goes for another month, so we pulled together some pickers which was bloody chis- tastic but we could see the potential.”

As a result, Thorn’s Mountain Retreats is now a steady provider of tea tree to the eastern states.

Peter, who received an OAM for his work in conservation, was smiting ear- to-ear smiling past all of the wildflowers while giving On the Land a tour.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” he grinned.

“At one time in the 1940s, they reckoned we had 7500 different wild- flowers in 60 hectares which was sensational.

“Now, they think it’s about 12,000 and they are still discovering.

“This is an amazing place.”

Words & photos: Ashleigh Fielding
Flourishing Flora

FlORISTRY was the perfect alternative for former Albany nurse Helen Leighton when she decided landscape design was too monotonous and not outdoory enough for her.

From planting a couple of flower beds to now taking regular wedding and event orders, Ms Leighton has kept her operation family-oriented and is working hard to maintain sustainable practices and grow everything locally from seed.

Her Kalgan property, Riverdale Farm, is as picturesque as you’d imagine, with delicate patches of soft pinks, purples, yellows and whites scattered across one hectare of her property.

Ms Leighton declared her passion for all things green thumb stemmed from her children.

“I first found my interest in gardening after the birth of my first child, Alia in 1980,” she said.

“I was just kind of hooked. We always had a garden but in 2004 we moved here, and I studied landscape design in London.

“I did that work for about 10 years but after the Great Financial Crisis, things got fairly quiet and I got a little bit tired of it.

“I moved here, and I studied landscape design in London.

“My daughter had a gap year that year so we decided to study floristry in London and have with her. I thought, I need to learn too if I’ve got all these flowers growing!

“Ms Leighton started off small, creating wreaths and bouquets for small weddings, but decided she needed to return to London to perfect her wedding bouquet techniques.

“And no matter what, she wanted to work as sustainably as possible and showcase local flora.

“I don’t bring stuff in by van, as a lot of stuff now is grown in Ecuador and Kenya,” Ms Leighton explained.

“Plants that are flown to Australia are not a particularly sustainable product from that point of view and they’re sprayed heavily to get into the country because of the strict quarantine laws.

“Plants don’t generally have a scent because that decreases the longevity of their bloom, so that’s been bred out of them so they can have a much longer shelf life.

“Whereas what I grow here is scented.”

Ms Leighton currently has approximately 300 roses on her property.

“That means a lot of demanding deadheading and pruning.

“On some weekends, she and husband Jim will spend nine hours straight tending to her photos, foxgloves, strawflower, Queen Anne’s lace, kangaroo paws and grevilleas, among other species.

“Ms Leighton said, when asked what flowers she liked in their bouquets.

“When I first started, I thought you could only have natives in a bouquet and have roses and other pretties in a bouquet and couldn’t really put them together.

“But people asked for it! So I can do my own thing, but I’ve just got to make it look good.”

“Proving to be most popular at the moment with Ms Leighton’s bouquets is anything blush pink and white, particularly roses.

“In spring, it’s all about delicate flowers; in summer, it’s all bold colours and autumn is the overgrown and wild look.

“Ms Leighton wouldn’t change it for the world.

“Her passion for floristry is clear and her care for the finished product is evident in the stunning arrangements captured in photos of weddings and events she’s catered for.

“I really like the practical side of growing, the physical exercise and outdoor life, and I love the thrill of seeing my flowers set up at a venue, knowing I’ve grown them from seed and made them look nice and ready made the venue look good,” Ms Leighton said.

And despite the challenges of battling weather and weeds and picking a location’s worth of flora on a regular basis, Ms Leighton wouldn’t change it for the world.

“The stuff at market is very uniform and boring; in summer, it’s all bold colours and autumn is the overgrown and wild look.

“They don’t ship well; it’s much better picked and used locally.

“And it’s just lovely to have these delicate things that give the bouquet that lovely movement when people are walking – they’re not stiff. They might have a waxy stem and they give a lot of shape.

“The stuff I market is very uniform and my garden is not very uniform. I love the slightly wild, romantic style.”

And despite the challenges of battling weather and weeds and picking a location’s worth of flora on a regular basis, Ms Leighton wouldn’t change it for the world.

“Her passion for floristry is clear and her care for the finished product is evident in the stunning arrangements captured in photos of weddings and events she’s catered for.

“I really like the practical side of growing, the physical exercise and outdoor life, and I love the thrill of seeing my flowers set up at a venue, knowing I’ve grown them from seed and made them look nice and ready made the venue look good,” Ms Leighton said.

“It’s a lovely thing to do with my daughter and my husband as we get to work together, and each season brings a different set of blooms – there’s always something new to work with.”

Words & photos: Ashleigh Fielding
THE story of Porongurup sisters Fiona and Gail Glen is one that will likely ring true with many families operating businesses from their backyard.

The further you look, the more of these types of businesses you will find in the Great Southern, and it reminds us of how hard regional people work in their fight to keep local, homegrown, rural produce on the map.

For these two, it all started with their business Poppy’s Patch retail nursery in Mount Barker.

Fruit trees were sold at the shop and by chance, a man the pair knew asked if they’d take on 30 of his apple trees so they wouldn’t go to waste.

Fiona and Gail happily accepted and decided in 2016 they would take on a leap and specialise solely in apple trees.

They sold Poppy’s Patch – now known as Strike Me Pink Nursery and Art Gallery and rebranded as Pippin Grove Heritage and cider apples.

They operate from Fiona’s house and within three years, have expanded to 70 varieties of apple trees.

“Each of our trees has its own qualities, mainly flavour,” Fiona said.

“The cider ones have got to have really strong flavour but the eating apples… there’s just no comparison!”

“We have some apples that you just wouldn’t believe the flavour of.”

One of the factors the sisters attribute the quality of the apple trees to is their homegrown semi-dwarfing rootstock.

They previously used rootstock from other Australian locations but quickly learned they’d need to make their own to get the quality they wanted.

“Each year, we dig and take all the rooted pieces and graft it,” Gail said.

Apple tree growing isn’t a simple business but Fiona and Gail learnt to have all the tricks of the trade down pat.

“We usually graft several hundreds and if those, we might have 400 take (to the graft),” Gail said.

“So I’d say we have 400 new trees each season with a backing of about 1000.”

The pair are interested in extending their tree varieties even further and are testing 30-odd new ones at the moment.

“We tasted our Geeveston Fanny apples for the first time last summer… lovely strawberry flavour with tang and sweetness… a lot of modern apples are getting rid of that tang,” Fiona revealed.

“So what’s next for the Glen sisters?”

“The next stage will be whether we can make some cider, that’s probably the most part of the adventure,” Fiona said.

“It would be so exciting if we could; at the moment, we are looking for a cidery that would make it for us and keep our apples separate from the run of the mill apples, so we can taste our flavour.”

“We just want the old varieties, they are wonderful,” Fiona said.

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A NEW oats variety called Koorabup, the Aboriginal name for the Deramore River meaning black stream, was released at a property in the Great Southern last month.

Koorabup has improved disease resistance and is set to open up new areas to hay production in Western Australia.

The new variety was developed by the South Australian Research and Development Institute (SARDI) with support from the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development (DPIRD), as part of the National Oat Breeding program.

The variety was initially crossed in 2005 from two WA advanced breeding lines and has been tested in field trials at several locations across the nation, including Cunderdin and Highton in WA.

SARDI Principal Plant Breeder Pamela Zwer said Koorabup had similar traits to the popular oats variety Carrolup, but with improved resistance to fungal diseases septoria.

Septoria occurs throughout the cereal growing areas of WA and is most severe in high rainfall zones, causing crop losses of up to 50 per cent in susceptible varieties.

“This trait that sets Koorabup apart is improved resistance to septoria, whereas most oats varieties are susceptible to highly susceptible to this disease,” Dr Zwer said.

Koorabup was developed by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DPIRD) and South Australian Research and Development Institute (SARDI) with support from the Australian government.

“Septoria occurs throughout the cereal growing areas of WA and is most severe in high rainfall zones, causing crop losses of up to 50 per cent in susceptible varieties.”

Koorabup is regarded as a mid-tall variety, with early mid to mid-season maturity.

In addition to its improved resistance to septoria, it also has good root and bacterial blight resistances.

Koorabup seed has been bulked up in the past two years and will available for harvest via the National Oat Breeding program’s alliance with commercial partner ABVCC. II

This resistance can result in hay yields slightly higher than Carrolup and improved quality performance, providing an alternative cropping option—particularly for growers in the medium to high rainfall zones, where septoria is common.”

Dr Zwer said Koorabup also had characteristics highly desired by the oaten hay trade.

“This variety produces a distinctive blueish-green crop, with thin stems that meet hay processing requirements, although it has soluble carbohydrates averaged slightly lower in WA trials,” she said.

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Wildflowers are in full bloom this season across the Great Southern. Check out pages 10-11 to learn about how a bushfire-ravaged estate became a thriving wildflower haven and enterprise.

Photo: Ashleigh Fielding

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