

Martina Matzner,  
pioneer in the NT  
mango industry.



# AGRICULTURE ADVOCATE

*Top End mango grower Martina Matzner is determined to pass on her passion for agriculture to the next generation.*

STORY NATHAN DYER PHOTOS DAVID HANCOCK

**O**n a humid June afternoon in the Top End, Martina Matzner is surrounded by mango trees and hoping for a cold snap. “At this time of the year we want the cooler weather because it initiates a good flowering,” says the general manager of Acacia Hills Farm, 60 kilometres south-east of Darwin. “We need it below 18 degrees, preferably, for a week or so, and then usually the trees flower very uniformly.” After that, Martina says she’s happy for the warm weather to return, to help the farm’s 50,000 Calypso mango trees fruit and mature.

Although today she’s widely regarded as one of the pioneers of the Territory’s mango industry, the German-born horticulturalist’s journey to the Top End followed a winding path. Born in Munich, Martina grew up in the small southern German town of Landshut, initially studying theatre science and psychology after leaving high school. It wasn’t until she heard about a course in agricultural engineering that she discovered her real passion. Martina says science indulged her curiosity for the natural world. “I love nature, and I think science explains what you see around you,” she says. “So when agriculture engineering was offered I took great interest, because living amongst a rural area I saw it as a way of understanding how it all worked.”

Martina was surrounded by dairy, grain and forestry farms in Germany, but a trip to Australia before her final year at university gave her career a very different direction to most of her peers. After a brief stay in Melbourne, Martina headed north to take up a traineeship on a property at Humpty Doo and her road to mango farmer unfurled. She says the Top End in 1989 was like nothing she’d ever experienced before. “It was wild and adventurous, and I loved it,” she recalls. After returning to Germany for a year to write her thesis on mangoes, Martina was back in Australia looking for adventure.

But the road to farmer would take yet another twist after she landed a job with Territory crocodile biologist Professor Grahame Webb, who was establishing his now famous

Crocodylus Park, on Darwin’s outskirts. For five years the young German agriculture graduate worked with crocs. “We went out collecting information about crocodiles in the wild, to Arnhem Land at a time when it was still really hard to get there, to survey crocodile densities in the rivers,” says Martina, grinning at the memory of those adventurous years. “I suppose that’s what the Territory is all about, those vast opportunities.”

Despite her reptile work, Martina retained a strong interest in agriculture. “I never really stopped with mangoes – even while I was working with crocodiles I was doing various monitoring projects,” she says, explaining how a return to university, this time at Charles Darwin to study horticulture, eventually led to Acacia Hills. There she implemented the region’s first integrated pest-management program, monitoring the farm’s orchards for pests and developing practices to reduce insecticide use. “We developed thresholds and then worked out the amount of pesticides we needed to use, which was great benefit for the environment, and monetary savings, something everyone should do,” she says.

For the next two decades Martina worked closely with farm owners Anne and Haig Arthur to implement new technologies, including advanced water monitoring. In 2000, Martina began transitioning the farm from an orchard of 8000 trees of various varieties, to 50,000 Calypso mangoes, effectively pioneering the variety’s Territory development. “I think if you’re prepared to try new things, that’s where the Territory is a great place to be,” Martina says. “Because if you strive to achieve things you can still do that. There are great possibilities up here.”

In addition to driving change at Acacia Hills, Martina has played a vital role in various industry groups. Her current commitments include roles with the NT Mango Industry Association, NT Farmers Association and the advisory committee for magpie geese mitigation.

Chief executive of the NT Farmers Association, Shenal Basnayake, says Martina’s passion for agriculture





*Martina chats with Shannon Leeson, who has just started working at the farm; Martina uses near-infrared (NIR) technology to determine the ripeness of the fruit. OPPOSITE: Martina holds Nelly.*

is well known and widely regarded across the Territory. “She certainly is an incredible lady,” Shenal says. “She’s a very strategic thinker, and she thinks objectively about things and she has a vision ... She’s definitely committed and very, very passionate about the industry, and not just the mango industry, but the whole industry, and that’s what sets her apart.”

Shenal says Martina’s European background has probably helped her see the bigger picture in terms of agriculture’s role in the Territory’s overall development. “Oftentimes you need people from the outside, with experiences and cultural backgrounds that are different,” Shenal says. “Martina’s very good at being able to see the bigger picture and how the various bits and pieces fit into that picture.”

Former high-school agriculture teacher Greg Owens has worked with Martina for more than 20 years. He remembers clearly the first time he met the young ag graduate. “Absolutely keen as mustard, she was,” Greg says. “You could see right from the start she had a big future in

the industry, because as well as the job, she was interested in people, and she’s kept that passion.”

Greg, now an industry development manager with NT Farmers, says Martina is particularly interested in technology in farming. Most recently the pair has worked on developing near-infrared (NIR) technology to determine mango ripeness without the need to destroy sample fruit. He says Martina’s passion for NIR, and similar projects, rubs off on others and makes her a true industry leader. “She’s one of those special people you get in industries that have that focus to keep it going forward.”

Greg says her interest in people, not only farming, makes Martina the ideal person for her latest project: getting more young people involved in Territory agriculture. “It takes someone in the industry with that sort of passion to really connect with kids,” he says. “Teachers can say it all they like, but when kids see that spark from someone in the industry it really shows them there is a great career ahead in agriculture in Australia.”

As winner of the Northern Territory’s 2016 Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation (RIRDC) Rural Women’s Award, Martina plans to work with the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden program in schools and Charles Darwin University to engage young people in agriculture. “It’s very hard to get young people into agriculture or horticulture and I think the reason for that is a simplistic stigma attached to what we do as farmers,” says Martina, outlining the reason behind her project.

“In Europe, many farms have been in the one family for hundreds of years, handed down generation after generation,” she says. “But because Australia is so young, we haven’t really got that very long agricultural history. Down south it’s a bit different, but up here, for example, they’ve only been growing mangoes for 20-odd years.” She says with more and more corporate farms and fewer family businesses, it’s now more important than ever to think strategically about how farming knowledge is passed onto younger generations.

“Farming is very complex and I think if young people realise that complexity and engage with it and get involved with the technology that goes hand-in-hand with farming, then we won’t have a problem,” Martina says. “But we need to instill this information at a very young age, because unless we teach young generations to embrace this technology and learn about it, then technology is only as good as the people who are trained to use it,” she says.

Martina says perhaps more than anywhere else, engaging technology and the next generation is crucial to the development of agriculture in northern Australia. “I think we’re living in such a fast-changing world of technology that if we embrace that and use it the right way, we can do things better, we can achieve higher yields, but we can also be more sustainable in terms of our environment.”

Above all else, Martina says she has one clear message for younger people. “The message I really want to get across is that farming is a worthwhile career path.” 🐾

