



HD **China** Trees

BY Tim Lee

WC 2,568 words

PD 18 October 2014

SN Australian Broadcasting Corporation Transcripts

SC ABCTRS

LA English

CY (c) 2014 Australian Broadcasting Corporation

LP

After years of negotiation a Victorian **commercial** tree farm is about to send their first batch of ornamental trees to **China**.

PIP COURTNEY, PRESENTER: We hear a lot in Australian agriculture about the great potential of **China**. But doing business with the world's most populous country can be a hard road.

TD

That had been the experience of the Blerick Tree Farm in eastern Victoria, but in coming months the **firm** expects to send its first batch of ornamental trees to **China** and it's hoping it will be the start of a major export industry.

TIM LEE, REPORTER: When the nearby mountains are crested with snow and most of the plant world is in winter dormancy, the workers at Blerick Tree Farm are at their busiest.

RON GERITZ, BLERICK TREE FARM: So what we've done is we've grown these trees for three years from small, grafted seedling in the ground and then, when they're ready, we're harvesting these now and then we sell them straight out of the field like this, or we can take these bags off and pot them up into a larger pot size and grow them for another one or two years to get an even bigger tree.

TIM LEE: Winter, when the branches are bare, is the optimal time to dig and transplant deciduous trees.

RON GERITZ: You're always up against time, because these trees are now starting to flower. So it means you have to get them out of the ground, but you have to wait until they go dormant, which this year was late. So you sometimes only have a month for a window. What you do is you plant the tree in the bag and then it can grow for two years in the bag, but what the advantage is you can produce a tree like this size, but with a 50 or 55-litre root ball. What happens is, 90 per cent of the roots stay in this bag, but it allows 10 per cent of the feeder roots to go out and it thickens up inside and that's where it stores 90 per cent of the carbohydrate.

So when you dig this tree up, take the felt bag off, 90 per cent of its root system is still with this tree, but it's in a size that you can actually handle it and they take off very well.

TIM LEE: If not for the bag, the tree would weigh a quarter of a tonne. But at around 70 kilos, it's easily moved.

RON GERITZ: This tree here will go probably into Melbourne. Either into a private garden or into a development.

TIM LEE: A few short weeks earlier, the picture is very different. Autumn brings a dazzling beauty in a wide range of deciduous trees, cultivated largely for their shape and colour.

The rolling hills and rich red volcanic soil of Neerim South, east of Melbourne, is a perfect location for the **commercial** tree farm of Ron Geritz and Michelle Jones, though its beginnings were a little accidental.

MICHELLE GERITZ, BLERICK TREE FARM: In another life Ron and I were both schoolteachers and we had bought this **property** basically as a lifestyle **property** and it was a subdivision off a piece of farmland and it had nothing on it and our accountant said to us you need to do something to make it income-producing, so that you can claim the interest.

RON GERITZ: We settled on trees because we had to **buy** a tree for my sister and I couldn't believe how expensive these trees were to **buy**. And I said to Michelle, well you know - 'maybe we should grow these because there's obviously a market for it.'

MICHELLE GERITZ: We really only started off with a crop of silver birches and as we went around, they'd say, 'What else do you grow?' And it's like, 'Nothing.' 'Why not?' So we expanded from there and learnt how to graft and bud. We were both zoologists, that's our training, but we rapidly took a different turn and ended up studying about how to do plants and everything about plants.

TIM LEE: That was 25 years ago. Originally Blerick Tree Farm - named after the town in Holland where Ron's family originates - mostly supplied retail nurseries in Melbourne.

RON GERITZ: Then Bunnings came in, and Hardware House, and the big megastores and every year we saw a few of our little customers drop off. Until, you know, basically they all disappeared.

TIM LEE: Fashions in gardening have also changed markedly in recent times.

RON GERITZ: When we first started, you couldn't sell an advanced tree, there was no market for it. People were buying smaller trees, they would **buy** a bare-rooted tree and grow it, but at the same time that your gardening shows and your lifestyle shows came into, became more fashionable, people's mindset I think changed from waiting to wanting instant gratification.

So all of a sudden, we found that we could sell bigger trees.

MICHELLE GERITZ: We live in a generation now where people are building really nice houses and the garden was never really considered very important. It was something that you would start off small and wait for it to grow up. But now people actually spend just as much time planning their garden and strategically approaching how they will install it for the overall effect. That in itself drives demand for maybe different cultivars, like narrower varieties for smaller spaces.

RON GERITZ: It's the final culmination of five years of growing and these will go mainly to Melbourne for the privacy market, when people build a two-storey house and they need some privacy, then these trees can give you an instant screen in your backyard.

(Michelle showing customers' trees)

MICHELLE GERITZ: This one's about... 1.7 metres.

TIM LEE: These days the farm supplies trees up to 5 metres in height. To reach that stage may take six to seven years and a good degree of careful attention along the way.

RON GERITZ: People are happy to pay you to come out and give them advice, because it does represent a significant investment and I think - so there's more and more of these designers designing spaces, whether it be urban spaces or gardens, and then they're looking for quality plants.

TIM LEE: This renewed love of landscapes has become a global trend.

For the tree farm, it has meant a bold new frontier - **China**. Why **China**?

RON GERITZ: By accident, really, I guess, because we've got a pretty good web presence and it just happened that a **group** of **Chinese** were looking to set up large-scale tree farms in **China**, but they needed somebody who could show them how to do it because they didn't have an agricultural or horticultural background. So they were looking for somebody that actually could help them from the ground up, right from the start, where there was nothing there right through to the finished product, if you like.

MICHELLE GERITZ: We gave it a little bit of thought and we thought 'Why not?' Let's go and see what it's all about. So they paid for us to go across to **China** and explained their story to us and it's grown from there.

TIM LEE: More than two years on, after countless trips, negotiations and trade delegations, Michelle Jones and Ron Geritz are on the verge of exporting trees to **China**.

But it's taken a maze of paperwork and a tonne of perseverance.

MICHELLE GERITZ: Once you have sort of thrashed out the **commercial** intent, then it needs to be turned into a legal document to make sure you're legally protected, both in **China** and in Australia, I guess. So get a very good law **firm**, you know, and negotiate your legal fees in the first contract, which we didn't do.

Because it's very expensive.

TIM LEE: The aim is to establish tree farms throughout **China** to grow and supply high-quality ornamental trees to the **Chinese** landscape industry. This includes varieties not currently available commercially there.

It's proving to be a steep learning curve for both parties.

RON GERITZ: We sent them through all the material lists and specifications for potting mix and wires and everything like that. And when I got there, it was like - nothing. Nothing was what I ordered, there was no potting mix, there was just a bag of pine chips and a bag of sand and a bag of peat.

And so we had to design everything from first principles and really roll with the punches and just be very adaptive.

TIM LEE: Some ornamentals are plainly unsuited. White flowers, for example, are used only to honour the dead. But colours such as red and gold are associated with good fortune.

So Ron these are a type of maple, this spectacular red autumn colour?

RON GERITZ: Yeah, these are an *Acer rubrum*, a Canadian maple, and they have a beautiful red colour. This is actually trademark variety called October Glory. It's really popular in **China** because of its super-red colour.

The idea is that it brings good luck, so the **Chinese** will market this tree as a good luck tree and they'll be producing millions of them.

MICHELLE GERITZ: Red and gold are particularly colours associated with the emperor and royalty and that sort of thing. So **Chinese** culture, they really like those colours.

RON GERITZ: We are looking for other trees that fit that same sort of category, but anything that has this sort of feature, where it's got the beautiful red colour in autumn, that's what they're after because they don't really have any 'superstars', as they call them, that will do this.

And that's a whole new sort of market for them, because they've traditionally used only a few varieties of native trees, like plane trees and, you know, things that have been around forever. So this is a whole new ball game.

TIM LEE: Red is all the rage?

RON GERITZ: Red is the rage, that's right. So it's going to be very good.

TIM LEE: This ornamental pear, the American variety known as Cleveland Select, is one tree that shapes as highly promising for the **Chinese** market.

RON GERITZ: This is one of the trees that we're growing in **China** because it doesn't mind hot, humid weather. One of our farms is near Shanghai and it's quite hot and humid. So this will still colour up beautiful and, of course, the trick is that to find the right tree for that environment, because a tree that will colour up, say, in the north of **China** may not colour up in the south. So that's a trial and error.

But this is a great tree, it's fast-growing, holds its form nicely and the colour's really uniform. So great for street plants.

TIM LEE: Fabulous, very pretty.

RON GERITZ: Yes, it's a good tree.

MICHELLE GERITZ: In **China**, the trees will be destined for the landscape industry. There's no retail industry over in **China** as such, because everybody lives in apartments - there's no room. So it will go into public spaces, parks, **commercial** developments where they're putting up whole cities of **apartment** buildings, office buildings. They're basically constructing whole cities over there and they all need to be landscaped.

RON GERITZ: But the trouble is in the landscaping in **China** over the past hasn't produced very good trees, they've just been mainly concerned about size and they just transplant them and cut them to bits and they look terrible and they don't survive very well.

TIM LEE: Blerick Tree Farm aims to greatly raise those standards. Part of their plan is to export young trees, carefully grow them on-farm into large mature trees and sell them to the landscape industry.

They may look a little nondescript, but these young pear trees represent the first green shoots of what may become a large export trade.

Ron, all these trees are destined for **China**?

RON GERITZ: Yes, these are some root stocks that we're growing and they'll be budded next February and then they'll be sent to **China**, bare rooted, next winter hopefully, if we get all the permits through and everything works out OK.

MICHELLE GERITZ: Because it's only very small quantity they'll go across by air freight.

TIM LEE: The trees will need to comply with stringent quarantine requirements. For example, all soil will need to be washed from their roots. There's plenty of export to other countries, but sending plant matter from Australia to **China** is, yeah, quite difficult.

RON GERITZ: The permit situation's getting worse. The **Chinese** government's really clamping down, because - some of the reasons are various, but, you know, there's some illegal importation of trees that's going on and the government is really trying to stamp all of that sort of illegal activity out, so they're making it more difficult on the whole industry.

TIM LEE: So caution is advisable.

RON GERITZ: I don't want to have 500,000 trees on the ground here and then find that I can't get them out.

This will be the critical part. If we can get this consignment off, then we can ramp up production to 10,000 and 50,000 the following year.

TIM LEE: The timing will also be critical.

MICHELLE GERTIZ: Again, that's another challenge too, because we have to time it right that we've done an amount of dormancy over here in the winter months and then, because of the different seasons, and then they go across into the Northern Hemisphere where they'll be at the opposite season. So it's quite stressful on the trees too, because they'll go dormancy very quickly, then back into like a spring.

TIM LEE: The potential of the **China** market is breathtaking.

RON GERITZ: You're talking about a scale that is just enormous. I think the government now has set a parameter that they want the greening of the **Chinese** city, they want a minimum of 30 per cent of the city to be green space to try and clean the air and they're very serious about the pollution problem.

TIM LEE: The tree farm has other plans to branch out - quite literally.

RON GERITZ: I've got an agreement with the **Chinese** that we'll set up a joint venture to create an Australian range of trees in **China** and I want to bring out not only trees from here, but then we can take trees from other growers, Australian native plants, you know, that we can then take to **China** and sell.

But I think there's a big market there and lots of opportunities for Australians to do business there.

TIM LEE: There's a lot of unknowns?

MICHELLE GERITZ: There's many unknowns - it's a journey with an unknown destination. We're just on the journey. We'll see.

NS glife : Living/Lifestyle | ntra : Transcripts | gcat : Political/General News | ncat : Content Types | nfact : Factiva Filters | nfce : C&E Exclusion Filter | nfcpx : C&E Executive News Filter | niwe : IWE Filter

RE austr : Australia | china : China | melb : Melbourne | victor : Victoria (Australia) | apacz : Asia Pacific | asiaz : Asia | ausnz : Australia/Oceania | bric : BRICS Countries | chinaz : Greater China | devgcoz : Emerging Market Countries | dvpcoz : Developing Economies | easiaz : Eastern Asia

IPD China

PUB Australian Broadcasting Corporation

AN Document ABCTRS0020141019eaa00002