

THE WHITEBOARD RULES

OK. You've made the commitment to give TerraCottem a go. You've found funds in the budget and placed the order. And then you're being booked into a how-to workshop and you wonder, what's that all about and is it necessary?

"It was the first time we'd had training come with a pallet of product." Michael Hamling, Manager Parks & Environmental Operations for the City of Gosnells, is talking about the order they placed roughly five years ago. "You couldn't help be impressed by the way they backed up the product with the technical training; saying they wouldn't supply unless we did the training."

In the years since, Gosnells has had three more sessions to cater for staff turnover. And in Michael's opinion it's important. "We've three areas of operations – landscape design and construction, parks operations, and environmental operations. The 55 staff cover an area of close to 130 square kilometres, with 31 active reserves, 238 passive, 18 conservation areas and 40,000 street trees. The training we give our staff is based on the belief that a bit of knowledge for everyone goes a long way."

In fact, training appears to be an integral part of optimising the council's people resource. Whatever the training – machinery operations, asset data management, traffic management – the moment is maximised to help build connections between different teams, encourage networking and information sharing. "Working in a crew, it's easy to become insular. The training sessions are a chance for people to come together and have a bit of a chat; then there aren't issues when we need someone to move to another crew."



The Gosnells' team goes back for a refresher. L-R: Ron Jackman, Joanna McBride, Shane Hansord.

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The TerraCottem training slots right in, helping to achieve this, and gives everyone the knowledge needed to make the most of the product. It takes half a day, and is a combination of white board time and a practical session. "Following the training they can go out straight away and know what they're doing. And since the results are fairly obvious – they can see the quality of the plants – the TerraCottem is in the truck all the time. We never have to remind them to use it."

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What's also good is the way the training sessions are geared to a range of existing skill levels. "We've general hands and qualified horticulturalists and the training puts it into context for everyone. They can see the relevance: those who've studied soils can see the science behind it; and the general hands know what the problems are and understand the logic of how it works." The information is presented so that everyone comes away with something from one consistent message.

At another session run within the sister cities of Townsville and Thuringowa in Queensland, Project Officer Libby Guest gathered those people who'd need to know how best to use TerraCottem.

"I facilitate the Community Environment Fund, which helps local community groups with projects such as revegetation on public land - from riparian settings to coastal plantings into dunes, even planting into hideous clay." Given that TerraCottem is used as part of the process, it made sense to hold a workshop. "Our aim was to get everyone in so that they could get a better idea of how to use the product properly. This is good stuff, but it's not cheap, and from what the TerraCottem people had been saying to us, we had the sense that we were applying too much."

Those who participated came not only from the Council, but included volunteers from Greencorp and Landcare Australia.

"I'd expected to learn about the product so the session was what I expected. But it was this and more. We were also given a good background on soil types and how the product responds to different soil conditions, something which was relevant especially since they'd done their homework and presented the information in the context of our local environment. The workshop certainly went well beyond the product."

So at the end of the day, everyone knows what they're working with and how best to get the most out of it. They've also had a nice little refresher course, not only of the basics everyone should know about what makes things grow, and what stops them, but also why they do what they do. Says TerraCottem's Russell James, "Standing out the front at a workshop you can see that people appreciate that they are in a good industry. It's also obvious that they care about what they do. And along the way, these workshops send a pretty clear message back, confirming that what they are doing is important."

Clockwise from top left: TerraCottem lets you get away with fewer waterings; here, it helps rapid establishment; failure rate is significantly reduced in hostile sites; when you use it you'll have the confidence to plant, mulch, water and drive away.



THE DOCTOR PRESCRIBES TC

Here's a no-brainer. If someone goes to the trouble to dig a hole and plant something in it, they want it to live. When they come back later, they'd like to see a bit of living green. And if they're in the business of planting things, then they definitely want to see thriving plants for more reasons than personal gratification.

Shane Grundy is the Bush Doctor, and he's in the business of bush regeneration, or as he puts it "restoring and maintaining ecosystems." Working in the Cumberland Plain Woodlands, Western Sydney, Shane and his team handle projects for catchment management authorities, councils and water suppliers – doing everything from fabricating landscapes from scratch to regeneration ("helping to reinstate the natural processes"). The methods Shane uses are varied: tools like engineering works with rocks to divert and manage run off; weed management; and, of course, planting.

Which is where TerraCottem comes in. "I was talking to Russell James one day a few years ago, about this new product he had which had been developed to stop desert encroachment in Africa. He pointed out that I could probably make good use of it."

The Bush Doctor's first planting with the TerraCottem treatment took place in William Howe Regional Park back in 2001. The site was high, dry and exposed. "We were working in very hard shale-based soils. It was a horrible place to work."

And the result? "I have vivid memories of it. I did notice a difference - bloody oath. And I wasn't the only one; the national park and wildlife ranger couldn't believe it either, how quickly things grew and how healthy it all looked. I've been using it ever since and I don't like to plant without it."

Oh, and there's one more benefit. Part of planting is the follow up maintenance, which includes giving plantings two or three follow up waterings. Working with TerraCottem reduces the need to go back!

the bush doctor's tips:

1. dig the hole as big as possible; make the effort to break up the soil
2. use TerraCottem, making sure you mix it in to the soil
3. cover the soil with weed mat or mulch

NOT JUST A WATER CRYSTAL

While we don't like to labour the point, TerraCottem is not just another water storing type product. Yes, it does have water-absorbing polymers in its make-up, but they're only part of the overall product. And it's the way all the components work together which produces the results.

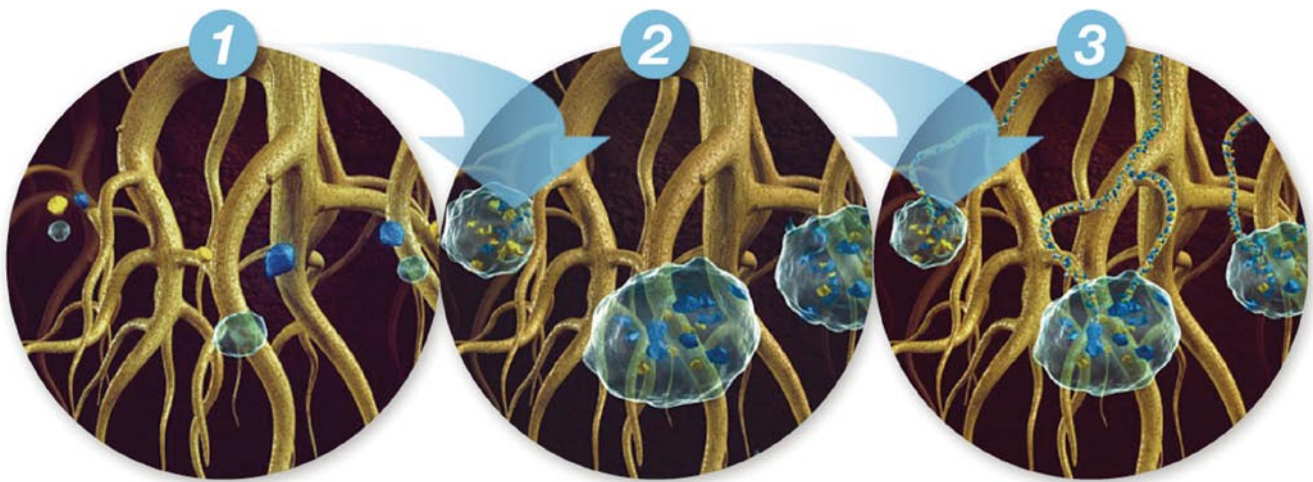
We've talked before about TerraCottem's root growth precursors – chemical compounds which give the plants a kick start by inducing them to synthesise their own growth hormones. Unlike growth hormones which would rapidly biodegrade, the precursors hang around, doing their job, for a year.

Then there is a nicely varied collection of plant nutrients – soluble mineral fertilisers, in a format suited to the early growth phase of a plant; slow release fertilisers, designed to offer a constant source of food over many months; and synthesised organic fertilisers which focus on the soil, stimulating microbiological activity and general soil health.

And finally we have the hydroabsorbent copolymers – not just one polymer with a narrow water-holding and water-releasing ability, but a group of them providing those

functions over a wide range, so that more water can be stored and released under a broader variety of conditions.

And while we're talking about water storing products, it's worth mentioning that while hydroabsorbent polymers may look similar, their chemical construction, the physical structure of the network, and especially the crosslinking density can be vastly different. This affects how they absorb, store and release their contents, and it determines their toxicity, longevity and suitability for use with growing plants. Caution should be exercised, as many are sodium-based, (TerraCottem is potassium-based) and manufactured principally for use in baby diapers and other sanitary wares, for use as flocculants and for chemical liquid waste disposal, making them unsuitable for use with plants or turf despite the fact that they've been repackaged and sold for use in horticulture.



1. mixed with the soil, TerraCottem works at root level; 2, to be activated by watering the plant; 3, its components producing root hair growth.

Planting into sand? Here's proof that TerraCottem boosts even sandy soils' ability to hold water. Sydney Environmental & Soil Lab recently ran various lab tests on some sand material for TerraCottem. Director Simon Leake's report, stated - "At all tensions the TerraCottem treated sand showed improved water holding ability. This improvement is highly significant at all tensions measured, about 56% increase at 50mm of suction and 78% increase in water holding capacity at 350mm of suction. This will make a very significant difference to the intervals between waterings, the water storage capacity of a sand profile and the ability of a sand to rapidly store incident rainfall or irrigation and hold it for plant use."