

Meet Chris Boston: Growing Passionfruit in Carnarvon, Western Australia

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In April this year, I had the privilege to visit PAI members Chris and son Markham Boston at their farm in Carnarvon, WA. Chris was originally born in Greenwich, UK in 1935 and came to Australia back in 1985. He is a very well-travelled man having spent 20 years in New Guinea, amongst other places. Chris is married with three adult children; Sasha, Markham and Saxon.

Markham is a successful artist with several mural commissions around the Carnarvon area to his name as well as being a highly experienced hot air balloon pilot. Daughter Sasha is an Occupational Therapist based in Perth and son Saxon is a local businessman.

Chris has been in the Carnarvon district for 40 years. His first farm was growing bananas when Chris purchased it, but as he was doing all the work himself he quickly switched to a less labour intensive crop and starting growing Jojoba after researching it in the USA (California). At one point, Chris was producing 95% of Australia's jojoba oil with a cold press on site processing the oil from the seeds. Jojoba oil and wax are produced from the seeds and used for medicine and in cosmetics and skincare products.

"I'd had 20 years in New Guinea of being the boss telling other people to do the work and suddenly I had to do it all myself," explains Chris.

He then also started a chook-farm at the site with 10,000 chickens at its peak producing fresh eggs. Chris also bought a second farm in Carnarvon which was being run by his eldest son Saxon growing asparagus, for sale into the wholesale markets as well as direct to a number of high-quality restaurants through a former-farmer friend based in Perth.

Back in the mid 2000's, his wife decided it was time for him to slow down and retire having just turned 70 and so he sold the chook farm site and moved into town for a slower pace of life.

Eighteen months in to 'retirement' he was thoroughly bored and son Saxon had ambitious plans for an earthmoving business, so the pair swapped with Chris coming back onto the farm.

At around the same time, his younger son Markham joined his father at the farm in Carnarvon. Up until COVID struck Markham had been an international hot air balloon pilot having flown in Africa, UK, NZ and Australia.

The current farm site is 25 acres and was all asparagus but it's a crop which requires a lot of water and is very labour intensive being all picked, sorted and packed by hand.

Chris highlights what a challenge it is to employ workers these days with successive governments having placed such a burden on farmers. As one of Chris's friends likes to say, it's like the politicians have their heads in the clouds and their hands in your pockets. Many growers will relate to that sentiment, I'm sure.

Chris wanted something to do once he had moved back out to the farm and as he had always kept chickens before, he set up a chicken enclosure to produce eggs and decided to try his hand at growing some passionfruit.

Chris has now been growing passionfruit for about 2 ½ years with his plants coming from Bunnings as the only available source of material in his part of the country. He has planted 'Panama Red' currently although some of the plants don't seem to be producing fruit that matches the label! He originally had some Nelly Kelly plants too, but they didn't suit the climate and went feral rather than being productive!

Only about 20% of the fruit produced actually gets to market as he grades very hard to remove blemished or damaged fruit. Once collected the whole fruit is cooled before being packed and sent to the Perth markets alongside the farms' asparagus crop. The reject fruit are pulped with the resulting fruit product being supplied to the restaurants serviced by the direct asparagus sales channel. The transit time from Carnarvon to Perth is only 1 day and the farm sits directly across the road from a chilled transport company.



Chris Boston's passionfruit is one in a very long line of interesting projects that he has been involved in over the years. His engineering expertise is perfectly exemplified by the laundry management system transporting clothes from the house upstairs to the laundry downstairs! *Photo credit: Jane Richter*

Chris and I had a good discussion about growing techniques, disease identification and plant nutrition as he was unaware about some of the peculiarities of passionfruit and its insatiable appetite for potassium to generate good flowering and fruit set. I was also able to share copies of the industry grading guides which also help with basic pest and disease identification.

Harking back to some of his time spent in the highlands of New Guinea where he grew Arabica coffee, the idea of growing Robusta coffee has got Chris very excited and that will likely be his next project as long as he can secure the seed he needs.

This is a man that clearly cannot sit still for a moment, much to his wife's chagrin I suspect! Evidence of his ingenuity and engineering prowess are everywhere with a shining example being the laundry management system using a giant pulley wheel to transport dirty clothes down to the laundry below the house and clean clothes back up.

I could have stayed for hours listening to Chris's life story and I certainly left with the feeling that he has many more exciting projects in him yet.

Thank you Chris & Markham for welcoming us onto your farm.

About Carnarvon

In Carnarvon, the summers are short, hot, muggy, extremely windy, and mostly clear; the winters are comfortable, windy, and clear; and it is dry year-round. Carnarvon sits at the mouth of the Gascoyne River which is the longest river in Australia. It is said to be an "upside-down river", because it flows normally for about 120 days of the year and below the dry riverbed for the remainder of the year. It is, in effect, a huge water storage system with the river aquifer lying below the desert sands.

The Carnarvon Horticulture District is one of the most productive in Western Australia for horticulture, producing a wide variety of fruit and vegetable crops including but not limited to bananas, table grapes, mangoes, melons, tomatoes, capsicums and green beans.