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Market report: Horticulture

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SMARTPHONE apps are changing the way horticulture producers run their businesses.

Hundreds of apps are now readily available to growers and are saving farmers time and money by assisting in crucial tasks such as determining fruit sunburn risk, calculating water levels for vines and identifying pests and diseases.

It almost sounds too good to be true but most apps are reasonably priced, from \$5 to \$50, and some offer basic access for free.

Tasmanian farmer James McShane, who runs Farming with Apps, a website that critiques agriculture technology, says contrary to some beliefs, farmers are using smartphones and tablets as much as any other industry.

“What would you rather carry around with you --- a 1000-page book or an iPad?” Mr McShane says.

“When you consider a TV comes with sophisticated apps why can't we expect machines that cost half a million dollars to have the same thing.”

And while there are already hundreds of apps on the market, demand is pushing researchers to develop a broader range.



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Fruit growers will soon be able to determine sunburn risk and harvest fruit size through an app being developed by Melbourne University researcher Sigfredo Fuentes.

Fuentes says the app will work in conjunction with a weatherproof camera, with producers able to take images of trees and find out estimated fruit size and other factors, including sunburn risk.

“It’s the type of camera that can be clipped to the back of a tractor and take images, and the findings are sent back to the producer’s phone,” Fuentes says.

For wine grape growers an app measuring the water status of vines is being created by Primary Industries and Regions South Australia and the University of NSW.

The app is being trialled by 15 wine grape growers in South Australia, Victoria, NSW and Tasmania for the remainder of the growing season. It will feature a thermal camera attached to a smartphone to take images of the grapevine's canopy. The images will be analysed by the app, which calculates the vine water status.

PIR acting executive director Kathy Ophel-Keller says water and associated pumping costs is a significant component of the production costs for grape growers.

“Uncontrolled water stress has the potential to reduce the yield and quality of grapes and the resulting wine, which in turn reduces the return to growers,” Ophel-Keller says.

There's even an app being developed to assist wine grape growers with biosecurity.

Project Boundary Rider will use geofencing software to safeguard vineyards from pests, diseases and weeds. Developed by Vinehealth Australia, this type of technology will be a first for the Australian wine industry.

A Vinehealth spokeswoman says geofencing technology has the ability to help growers protect their properties from biosecurity incursions and manage outbreaks, should they occur.

And the Australian honey bee industry has access to an app that connects registered beekeepers with registered farmers.

BeeConnected is developed by CropLife Australia and the Australian Honey Bee Industry Council and enables two-way communication about the location of hives and where and when farmers are spraying crops. Contractors and farmers can input information on spraying activities that may be of interest to a beekeeper, and beekeepers are able to notify nearby farmers of the location of their hives.