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FLOWER POWER

BY CHARLENE GATT

BUSINESS is blooming for Australia's leading flower exporter WAFEX.

The company has notched up more than 20 years in business and is boasting a new subsidiary operation that is already making waves.

WAFEX is the brainchild of business partners Adrian Parsons and Craig Musson, who have successfully run the business from their respective offices in Sunshine and Perth.

Mr Parsons got into the horticulture industry as a part-time employee at Peter McGain's Chadstone store in 1981.

He was in charge of the store by the time he was 18 years old and after a two year stint working in the flower markets of Holland, the US, the UK and Israel, he came back to few job opportunities.

So he did the next best thing and became his own boss, starting up Man of Flowers from his brother's garage in Glenhuntly.

Meanwhile, Mr Musson migrated to Australia in 1989 having previously established and managed a large chrysanthemum flower farm in Zimbabwe and started up his first company, Indian Ocean Commodities.

The business focused on importing fresh flowers from Zimbabwe to the major Australian flower markets.

After establishing Indian Ocean Commodities as a major cut flower import operation, Mr Musson and business partner Alan Cumming then started to develop domestic markets for a range of Western Australian native flowers and foliage.

Mr Musson's father Jeremy – who had previously managed a large Western Australian cut flower export company – then joined the business, and the company changed names to Westralian Flora Exports.

Before long Mr Parsons was providing an export packing and distribution service for Westralian Flora Exports, and the two companies also worked together on developing sales of Victorian-grown daffodils to interstate supermarkets.

At the same time, Westralian Flora Exports took on the Western Australia and New South

Wales agencies for a range of Man of Flowers products.

Between 1991 and 1994, the trading relationship between Westralian Flora Exports and Man of Flowers grew to the point where the two companies merged in May 1994.

WAFEX was born.

In the early days the business made a concerted push to develop export markets in America, Canada, Japan, Switzerland, Germany, Singapore, Taiwan and Hong Kong.

There was no time for Mr Parsons or Mr Musson to stop and smell the roses.

The operation was run on a shoe string budget, poor handling facilities, small capacity delivery vehicles and meant long hours for all.

"With no business experience, capital or business plan we would have made a great case study in how not to start a business," Mr Musson said.

"However, what we lacked in one area was more than made up for in sheer hard work and determination."

Mr Parsons added: "It was not uncommon for me to start work at 1am, go to the airport to collect flowers and then go to the market to sell and distribute flowers, return to my warehouse, continue packing, deliveries all day, then find time to stay on top of paperwork, often crawling home at 6pm, asleep at 7pm."

In 1997, Alan Cumming left as a WAFEX director and the following year, Jeremy Musson passed away.

Mr Musson and Mr Parsons then divided up the world – with Mr Musson focusing his sales efforts on Europe and Japan, and Mr Parsons taking over all export sales to the U.S., Canada and South-East Asia.

"It's almost two companies in one," Mr Parsons said.

"The Perth operation, in terms of export, looks after certain markets, likewise with Melbourne because of different time zones. It's the same with suppliers – the Perth guys service all the Western Australia growers, and then we look after all the Eastern states growers."

Additional sales staff were recruited at