BY ROBIN TAYLOR

Improving household incomes and food security through more productive and diverse farming systems is an important priority for ACIAR, as is helping producers identify market opportunities.

In some Asian and African countries, flower cultivation (floriculture) has become a profitable activity for smallholder farmers. But in the Pacific the industry is in its infancy.

For people living in southern Australia, ginger flowers, heliconias, anthuriums and orchids are exotic blooms that make spectacular floral displays. However, in the Pacific, where these flowers thrive, people take them for granted and are only just starting to realise their commercial potential.

The results of a recent ACIAR scoping study, which examined the potential for floriculture in Fiji and Papua New Guinea, showed that local markets, rather than export markets, hold the best growth potential.

Study coordinator Kyle Stice, of Fiji-based consultants Koko Siga, says the local non-tourist market for flowers has expanded rapidly since the establishment of wholesale flower markets in Nadi (in 1999) and Suva (in 2001).

“Our data show that the market has increased about tenfold in the past eight years and there is still a shortfall of flowers,” Ms Stice says. Anthurium sales through the Suva market have increased from about 20,000 stems in 2001 to more than 60,000 stems in 2006, with a corresponding increase in value from FJ$10,000 to FJ$46,000.

More than 1,000 people are directly involved in Fiji’s floriculture industry, most of them women, including 200 semi-commercial cut-flower growers and a few small commercial growers.

While the main market is traditionally flowers for weddings and funerals, a new market is emerging for cut flowers in the workplace and homes.

“The establishment of the wholesale markets has given small florists and informal flower-arranging businesses access to a consistent supply of high-quality, inexpensive flowers which, in turn, gave them confidence to boldly market their products,” Ms Stice says. “The result has been unprecedented growth in demand.”

ORCHIDS’ PRIDE OF PLACE

Fiji’s most popular cut flowers are dendrobium orchids, which take pride of place in wreaths, bouquets and flower arrangements. A commercial operation, South Sea Orchids, introduced commercial orchid growing to Fiji in the early 1980s and now has about 120 out-growers who supply the company with blooms.

Many of these growers are women from poor rural households, who can earn a reasonable livelihood while still working at home. Raising the plants involves about 50 days work a year, so the out-growers can seek other work or still look after young children. Many of the women who began as cut-flower growers are now supplying potted plants and flower arrangements to a range of customers.

The results of the ACIAR study were presented to the local growers, enabling them to refocus their businesses. One recommendation from the study was to expand the line of floriculture products on offer to include guzmanias, a unique flowering plant from the pineapple family. This recommendation was taken up by the private sector and more than 16,000 improved variety plants were imported into Fiji from Holland earlier this year and distributed to growers.
“It just shows everyone where we should be putting our energy and resources,” Ms Stice says.

When the study team surveyed hotel demand they found that most hotels had extensive areas of land and could grow their own flowers. The only time they were likely to buy flowers was to supply special events such as weddings or conferences. “Instead of banging our heads against the wall trying to get export markets or hotels to buy our flowers was to supply special events,” Ms Stice says. “The venues have a tradition of growing food gardens. That knowledge is instilled at an early age so they are starting from a good base.”

Ms Hintze found the areas where practices needed to be improved were postharvest handling, transport and harvesting. She is hoping to run workshops on these topics in Fiji in 2009.

In PNG, the other focus of the ACIAR-funded study, the natural environment is ideal for tropical cut flowers, but opportunities for exporting flowers are limited due to marketing and other constraints. The study found there is potential to establish a commercial indigenous orchid industry, exporting unique hybrid plants and expanding eco-tourism activities.

VEGETABLES A GROWING OPPORTUNITY IN THE SOLOMONS

Vegetable production on Solomon Islands is providing another opportunity for smallholders to diversify agricultural production into high-value crops. With a local vegetable market unable to meet demand, an ACIAR project is helping smallholder vegetable growers overcome obstacles to production.

Despite increasing numbers of smallholder farms around Honiara and the growing importance of vegetable farming in the neighbouring islands of Malaita and Makira, local production falls far short of meeting year-round domestic demand.

The first major activity of the new project was a stocktake of the three provinces—Guadalcanal Plains, Malaita and Makira. Despite growing different crops, using different management systems, vegetable farmers from the three islands were found to share common problems, such as pests and diseases.

Overcoming these production constraints became the focus of the ACIAR project led by the World Vegetable Center (AVRDC) and undertaken in partnership with the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock, Kastom Gaden Association, Don Bosco Rural Training Center, Vois Blong Mere Solomon and Farmset Ltd.

The team recommended seed evaluation and variety assessments, in addition to developing a simple technology package consisting of adaptable varieties, a fertiliser regime and basic pest and disease management.

Variety trials in Guadalcanal and Malaita are using seed of improved varieties from the AVRDC, including yard-long beans, hot and bell peppers, cucumber, onion, tomato, bitter gourd and selected indigenous species.

Project manager Dr Manuel Palada and project coordinator Dr Ravindra Joshi of the AVRDC say although the project started only recently, the effects should be felt quite soon. “We have many variety trials in place and the early results are quite exciting,” Dr Joshi says.

Honiara organic grower Mr Joini Tutua has experienced first-hand the high market value of AVRDC-introduced yard-long beans, which are twice as long and much crunchier than local varieties. After one successful crop he has planted a large area to the new variety. The introduced tomatoes, which flower earlier and are firmer than local varieties, are popular with cafes and hotels for juicing.

Another objective is to evaluate low-input crop-management practices, such as drip irrigation, starter fertilisers, organic manures and composts. Following a training workshop on integrated crop, soil and pest management, a soil-analysis service and pest profile are being developed during field visits and variety trials. “A number of other high-value horticultural crops could potentially be grown to improve income for smallholder farmers in the Pacific,” Dr Joshi says.