

## The Fire, its Aftermath, and the Future of Fragonia

At 4.30pm on Friday the 8<sup>th</sup> of January 2016, as John and I waited anxiously in Perth, we received a text from a neighbour of our farm at Harvey, which read. "It's like a bloody war zone down here!" It included a photo taken from his farm. John replied "Where's it looking to". The response from a farmer and man of few words was "Your farm". It was at this moment that we knew the fire had hit our farm!

We had returned from the farm to our home in Perth, on Thursday, the day before, as we had long planned a dinner with our children and their partners. Ironically it was to celebrate all our good fortunes! We were well aware of a catastrophic fire moving down from the hills and devastating the town of Yarloop, 7ks away from Harvey. Although it was fierce, we had no concern that it was something that would affect us. At dusk on Thursday night, the sky over Perth become ominously oppressive, with a heavy pall of dark smoke moving up from the south and hanging over the city. The Department of Fire and Emergencies Services (DFES) web site showed the fire moving at an incredible speed, out towards the coast and north of us. We started to feel anxious.

With our daughter Lisa and her baby, we spend the next day, Friday 8<sup>th</sup> waiting and constantly checking the DFES site to track the fire. To our horror it was turning to the south and we were literally in the line of the fire. At 4.30pm we knew our property had been burnt. No further news came through.

At the end of the day we gathered with family and friends overlooking the beach, to support one another. During this time I saw John move aside, take a phone call and a look of elation pass over his face. As he drew me in to the call, we learnt from another neighbour and volunteer firefighter that five fire trucks had managed to save our house and distillation shed, but all the plantation, the bush, a large storage shed with our equipment and our tractor were gone. Given the ferocity of the fire, we would not have been able to stay and we were relieved we were in Perth. We spent the rest of the night celebrating what had been saved rather than focusing on what had been lost!!

We speculated that the fire would be the most aromatic fire in the district!

It was not until Sunday morning, just over 24hrs later, that we were allowed back to our property. The road in was lined with blackened vegetation and a blanket of ash on the ground. Many spot fires were still burning. But this is what greeted us at the gate. From the gate in, the avenue of trees had been spared. It was such a moment of joy! All else looked black, eerie and ominous with many trees still burning, and a strong smell of smoke.

We walked over to the plantation – our magnificent crop of Fragonia, which we were to harvest the following week, had gone up and left very little but blackened branches or stumps and burnt irrigation tape.

The tea tree, rosalina and honey myrtle were also burnt out. However, these had all been harvested before Christmas, and we believe the intensity of the fire through these plants, was not as great, due to less biomass and hence less oil.

It took us all of 15 mins before we turned to each other and said – "OK what do we need to do now to ensure that Fragonia survives into the future." We could not walk away after 20 years of building

up markets for Fragonia and not have such a beautiful oil survive. We couldn't bear to think of disappointing our loyal customers.

We rang a young friend of ours for advice. Katinka, is a Professor at Murdoch University and specialises in regeneration of the bushland. She felt there was a good chance the plants would shoot again from their lignotubers but it would depend on the amount of heat damage to these lignotubers. She then said she would bring a group down to help replace the burnt irrigation tapes to get water onto the plants as soon as possible.

From this single but momentous act of kindness by Katinka, we were overwhelmed by further offers of help in so many ways and by so many friends, family and people we did not know. A special shipment of irrigation tape was sent from Melbourne and over the next 2 weeks, teams of people started to remove the burnt tape and laying and staking over 70ks of new tapes. Amazingly, on the second day, the sky opened up and it poured torrential rain!! We thought the universe might be feeling a little guilty! We had over 70 helpers, including 20 of our children's friends who all worked incredibly hard. The first two weeks were without power, hence no hot showers to wash off the black dirt, and no light till we could make time to rig up a generator. Food arrived, a neighbour returned with our blackened clothes freshly laundered and a friend baked John and me each a birthday cake. Driven by adrenaline, we were almost euphoric! I remember most the camaraderie, our optimism and boundless energy.

The rest of 2016 was incredibly busy as we commenced the clean-up.

Firstly, fences were replaced by a neighbour within the month.

The plantation was responding and we were overjoyed as new shoots started to appear. Within days of the fire, the tea tree was sending out tiny green shoots. The honey myrtle and rosalina, although slower, were also shooting. However, the Fragonia was very slow to shoot and very patchy. We believe the heat was so intense due to its huge biomass and oil content, that the lignotubers were damaged. Many of the patchy Fragonia shoots were smothered by the heaped ash lying over the stumps. In winter, 2 frosts hammered the Fragonia, and the final assault, as they struggled to survive, was a massive crop of weeds which smothered the surviving shoots. We were reluctant to spray, as the new shoots would be very susceptible. By spring it became apparent that we would have to replace the Fragonia. We went back to the locality from where we had sourced our original seeds, but to our horror, no plants were left, following a prescribed burn off. We had a few very small patches of Fragonia left in our plantation which were not burnt, due to sudden wind changes, and from these we were able to source seed. Don't tell me the universe wasn't giving us a strong message! Our neighbour Andrew who is a nurseryman, has grown 80,000 seedlings of Fragonia and these will be planted in November, 2017 ready for a light harvest in 2 years, 2019. We will be harvesting and distilling the patchy Fragonia, which we hope will enable us to continue to supply a limited amount of Fragonia oil to Practitioners till we are again in full production.

At the time of the fire, we had 40,000 seedlings of honey myrtle being grown off site, to enable us to treble our honey myrtle plantings to meet demand for this oil. We planted these out over winter of

2016. All the honey myrtle bays are now looking fantastic and we will be harvesting these in January 2018.

The regenerated rosalina is now flowering and we will collect the seed when ready for enlarging our current rosalina plantation. Then we will be able to harvest and distil the rosalina.

And the tea tree has never looked so good!!

As well, during 2016 we began generally cleaning up the farm. We have had dozens of Rose Gums removed which we had planted and which were severely burnt in the fire. These were dropping limbs and many were generally unstable. I have spent the last few weeks replacing trees round the distillation shed with shrubs. In the paddocks I have planted dozens of Eucalytus resinifera, trees which are much better suited to our area than the Rose Gums.

Soon many of the farm roads near the shed and house will have limestone re-laid to keep the dust down.

2016 was an emotional roller coaster. John and I were mostly able to support each other as when one was overwhelmed, the other seemed to be coping. For many months it was painful going into the plantation and many tears were shed. We had a week's holiday every 3 months to recharge our batteries. And we tried to focus on the way forward and not on what had happened. This became easier when it was apparent that the Fragonia plantation needed to be replaced. It was no longer 'wait and see' which we found incredibly difficult. Once that decision had been made, we were able to focus on getting the replacement underway. Emotionally, things then settled quickly for us and we seldom looked back. Surprisingly, we both believe the fire has had more positive outcomes than negative.

This year, as if we didn't already have enough to do, we purchased the burnt out pine plantation next to our farm. This will ensure that we will be able to expand to meet demand for Fragonia and target the bigger markets in the longer term. We have also just finished planting 50 hectares of manuka seedlings for honey on the new farm and are also interested in looking at the possibility of sourcing good seed for manuka oil production. We are also considering establishing a sandalwood plantation, which of course would not yield oil for many years. Hopefully our granddaughters will be the beneficiaries!

To ensure the future of Fragonia oil, we have undertaken several steps.

The first obviously, is the replanting of our burnt out Fragonia plantation. The first planting is this year, with a second planned for next year.

Secondly, by purchasing the property next door, we now have the capacity to expand our Fragonia plantings in the future.

And lastly and very importantly, we realised there must be a second grower. Discussions are underway to licence this grower, who has been provided with seed and will be planting out the seedlings at the end of 2017.

In writing this article, I have wondered at times, if it is not rather self-indulgent, reliving the fire and its aftermath. But since we first introduced Fragonia to the market in 2004, I have always felt we are

only a small part of the journey of Fragonia. It has been shared with Practitioners from all over Australia, who have taken some ownership of this special new Australian essential oil. Hence it felt important to share this part of the journey of Fragonia with you.

My dream has always been that Fragonia will be known and used globally long after John and I have stopped working. Our daughter Lisa, who works for The Paperbark Co., remains passionate and committed to this goal, so we see a long future for The Paperbark Co. with Fragonia. We now believe that Fragonia will be here as one of the beautiful Australian essential oils available to aromatherapists well into future.

John and I would like thank you all for your amazing support and well wishes and hope that you will remain loyal and patient until we return to full production of Fragonia oil.

Peta & John Day  
November 2017



**Image 1:** The fire hits our farm



**Image 2:** Our first view of the burnt out Fagonia plantation



**Image 3:** Replanting