

NURSERY PAPERS

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Free plant pest and disease testing helping nursery growers act earlier and reduce losses

A free, levy-funded diagnostic service is helping Australian production nurseries identify plant health issues earlier, avoid costly misdiagnoses, and reduce losses from pests and diseases.

By replacing trial-and-error decision-making with laboratory-confirmed results, the service is giving growers more confidence in how—and when—to act.

Led by the Queensland Department of Primary Industries (Qld DPI), the program builds on more than 15 years of industry-led work and provides:

- National diagnostic services for plant pests and diseases
- Practical advice to support on-farm decisions
- Extension and industry development support

At its core, the service is simple: get the right answer early, before issues escalate across production.



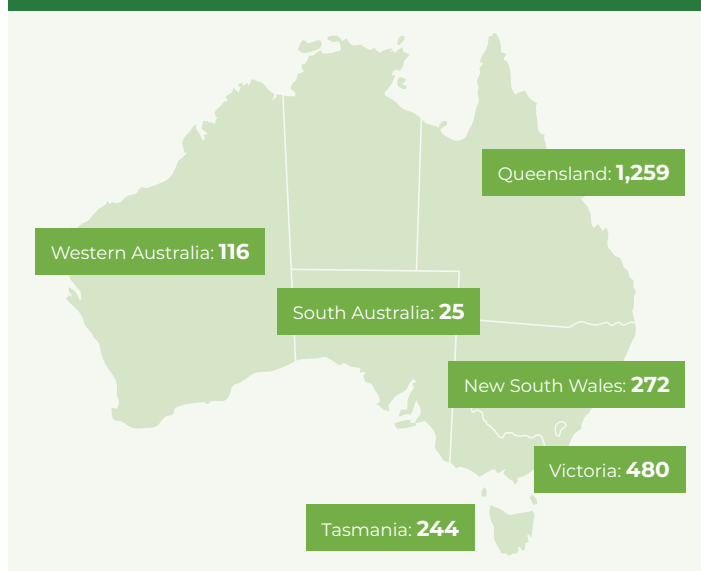
General nursery production shots showcasing strong hygiene practices.



Rising uptake as growers seek faster answers

Since free diagnostic services were introduced in 2021, engagement has grown steadily across all major production states. Nearly 2,400 nursery samples have now been submitted nationally, reflecting strong and sustained use of the service.

Total samples (2021–2025): **2,396**



Victoria and New South Wales have recorded particularly strong growth in recent years, indicating increasing awareness of the role diagnostics can play in day-to-day production decisions.

WHY EARLY DIAGNOSIS MATTERS IN PRACTISE

In nursery production, similar symptoms can point to very different problems—ranging from pests and pathogens to nutrition or environmental stress.

Without confirmation, growers can face:

- Misdiagnosis
- Delayed or ineffective treatment
- Increased input costs from repeated interventions

One recent case highlights the difference early diagnosis can make. A nursery submitted plants showing distorted new growth, initially suspected to be caused by a virus.

Diagnostics confirmed mite damage—not a viral infection.

Instead of pursuing a complex and potentially costly response, the grower was able to apply a targeted, lower-cost treatment with immediate impact.

This kind of clarity is where the service delivers great value.

“Even visually similar symptoms can have entirely different causes—making laboratory confirmation essential for confident decision-making,”

Andrew Manners, Project Lead and Principal Entomologist, Agri-Science Queensland Pest and Disease Diagnostics.

Initial diagnostic results are typically available within a few days, with reports designed to be practical and easy to apply in production settings.



Strawberry plants can have roots that appear healthy (left), but when their roots are washed can have root rot and be infected with *Phytophthora* (right).



STRONG UPTAKE REFLECTS ON-FARM VALUE

Since free diagnostic services were introduced in 2021, growers have increasingly integrated testing into their production systems.

- 2,396 samples submitted nationally (2021–2025)
- Strong growth across Victoria and New South Wales

More importantly, growers are seeing results:

- 67% reported reduced pest and disease incidence
- 70% reported improved plant health
- Reduced plant discards and lower management costs

Participation spans both NIASA-accredited and non-accredited nurseries, with many engaging for the first time.



WHAT THE SERVICE PROVIDES

The program offers a defined set of free diagnostic services to support production nurseries:

Free diagnostics include (per calendar year until January 2031) include:

- ✓ **Up to 6 free plant samples per nursery**
Testing covers fungal, bacterial, viral, mite and insect pests, with sequencing where required
- ✓ **Water testing (free)**
Two sets of pre- and post-irrigation samples to detect fungi, oomycetes and bacteria
- ✓ **Up to 6 samples of unused growing media for businesses producing the growing media to target key pathogens**, including up to 6 samples targeting key pathogens including *Phytophthora*, *Pythium* and *Phytopythium*

Additional samples:

- ✓ **Up to 12 extra samples at 50% cost**



Capsicum infected with *Capsicum chlorosis virus* and *Tomato spotted wilt virus*.



Minor leaf spots are sometimes an indication of serious root and crown rot. *Kentia* palm. Photos above are from the same plant



Chilli infested with broad mites.

Getting the most from the service

To improve accuracy and turnaround times, growers should:

- Submit fresh samples – ideally whole plants where possible
- Provide more plants when they are very small, and fewer when they are larger
- Include both healthy and affected material
- Package samples carefully for transport

For guidance on suitable samples, refer to the **Grow Help Australia** website.

Interstate submissions are supported, subject to biosecurity requirements.

Beyond diagnostics

Additional support is available outside the core free service, including:

- Plant parasitic nematode testing
- Bulk indexing for accreditation or market access
- Advanced molecular diagnostics
- Industry workshops

GET INVOLVED

Production nurseries can access the service by visiting the **Grow Help website, where they can follow the submission instructions, complete the online form and arrange sample testing.**

For guidance on what samples to send, refer to the website resources. If you're still unsure, contact the Grow Help team at growhelp@dpi.qld.gov.au.

Early diagnosis remains one of the most effective ways to improve outcomes, reduce uncertainty and limit production losses.

FURTHER INFORMATION

- Past nursery papers – www.greenlifeindustry.org.au/news?type=36453