

WELCOME TO THE JUNGLE!

Move over Costa... there's a new gardening guru in town, bringing joy to plant-obsessed Aussies

They say gardening is good for the soul, and when *Woman's Day* arrives at popular nursery Growing Grounds Australia, it becomes clear that it's true. Armed with her best flannelette and a beaming smile, owner and founder AJ Crane is bursting with pride as she takes us through her backyard nursery. The business owner has a love for plants that has seen her "grow" almost 50,000 Instagram followers and a TikTok so popular that her how-to videos amass more than 100,000 views. Much like her monstera and alocasias, AJ's side hustle-turned-full-time job is growing by the day, thanks to diehard plant-obsessed Aussies who have become serious collectors.

BLOOMING BUSINESS

"I started Growing Grounds back in 2018 with the dream of creating a business around the things that brought me joy and fulfilment, not just for myself but for the plant community as well," she tells. "I saw a gap in the market for rare plant nurseries, so I made it my goal to find and connect different wholesalers around Australia to bring the most sought-after and unique plants to the public."

Years ago, most would be hard pressed to find the coveted jewel of plant collections – the Monstera Thai Constellation. With its variegated leaves boasting distorted spirals of deep greens and faded yellow hues, it was considered a natural "mistake" worth thousands of dollars.

Now, thanks to businesses like AJ's, such plants are readily available and at a fraction of the cost they once were. However, for those hoping to bring a spray of green to their home, AJ says the best approach is to keep it simple.

"The best advice I have for those starting out is to start small, start green not variegated. Do your research about where the plants come from and don't be hard on yourself if it doesn't work out the first time around, because it will teach you how to care for the next one," she says.

VIRAL SENSATION

Thanks to AJ's popular online presence, she has been able to connect with followers around the globe, sharing advice on how best to give the wild world of at-home nurseries and DIY greenhouses a go, but it's chatting with Aussie locals she loves most.

"Social media is what brings everything to life and

helps connect me to all the 'planty' people of the world, especially my Aussies," says the 36-year-old.

'Social media is what brings everything to life'

"I'm really hoping within the next few years to find a much larger, more permanent space to really let my wild greenhouse dreams grow. My dream is to create an amazing jungle space, showing people the possibilities of growing indoors and helping people grow with their plants, giving them the confidence and knowledge to take on more peaceful projects and teaching people that caring for plants doesn't need to be stressful."

Expanding her business isn't the only

dream she has either. The success of TV staples like *Gardening Australia* and *Better Homes And Gardens* is proof of our obsession with gardening, and the Sydney local, from Rockdale, insists it's about time there is a focus on all things indoor gardening.

"I would absolutely love to be a part of those shows. Being able to teach more people about growing indoors and in small places is what I love the most," she says.

"I feel like there's not many people that cover indoor house plants on the telly. Being able to help people co-exist with their plants makes me so incredibly happy."



She would love to appear on *Gardening Australia* with the legendary Costa.

AJ loves showing off her new plants on social media.



AJ'S TOP TIPS

There's a lot more than meets the eye when it comes to caring for rare plants, and AJ says there's a couple of things you need to know before diving in...

AIRFLOW

Mimicking the movement of air around your house plants is incredibly important. A well-ventilated area will help prevent any fungal issues or pest problems.

LIGHTING

Find a well-protected spot with next to no direct sun on the leaves but still with a lot of bright light. Protecting your plant from the UV is important but so is finding the best light in the room.

MEDIUMS

Indoor plants often come in a growing medium fit for wholesale greenhouses, so a great way to control the success of your plant's growth is by changing the soil it's in to a non-soil mix. My favourite mix is orchid bark, perlite, coco coir, coco chips, vermiculite and charcoal. This allows you to still provide moisture to the root system but have enough aeration, so it dries out within a few days.

STRUCTURE

Something else a lot of new plant partners don't think about is structure. A lot of tropical indoor house plants love to climb like they would in nature, so giving the plant a moist pole to climb on means it has somewhere to root into, providing it with more support and encouraging huge foliage growth.

WATERING

Basic instructions on most plant tags are to water once a week, so it's super important to test how fast plants can dry out in your



It takes a little effort but the results are bloomin' marvellous!

home environment. The best way to do this is to take a pot and the soil mix you are using, fill it up like you are potting a plant, give it a good soak, sit it in the spot you want to have plants, check on it every day and document how long it takes to fully dry out.

FEEDING

Feeding your plant is also important. The top brand of fertiliser I stock is Growth Technology Foliage Focus – it's got all the nutrients you need to help your plant grow big and full. Combine that with Growth Technology Rootzone and your plant will have not just amazing foliage but an incredible root system to match.

TEMPERATURE

A lack of humidity can cause a plethora of issues with your plants – new leaves getting stuck, pest problems like spider mites and just an overall stunting of growth. A great way to keep the humidity up without turning your home into a sauna is to group your plants together. This will help create a little micro-humid area. Another great way to increase the humidity is to use a small humidifier to target the area.