

HORTICULTURE



Brothers Nat and Dick Jaques check the progress of young coffee trees.

Coffee — brewing up a sweet aroma of success

There's an awful lot of coffee in Brazil, and very little in Australia. But at least that has begun to change on the Atherton Tableland where two brothers have just marketed their first successful crop. John I'Ons reports.

There's a tantalising new aroma on the Atherton Tableland. This time it's not the fragrance of curing tobacco that's wafting on the warm, tropical air, but the delicious scent of fresh roast coffee.

For Dick and Nat Jaques it's also the sweet smell of success in an ambitious innovative enterprise.

When the Jaques brothers came to Australia from Tanzania, they knew plenty about coffee. But their experience was with a crop which needed a permanent workforce of 50 people for a 40ha plantation, and another 200-300 people for the harvest. Under Australian conditions, the labor bill would

have been about \$480,000.

Today the Jaques brothers can manage 40ha of coffee with just two workers. And they not only grow the crop, they've also set up a separate company to process and package it.

Before committing themselves to the Atherton venture, the brothers made a careful study of weather records over 50 years. One thing that Dick Jaques emphasises is that the growing area has to be frost-free. Their care has paid off in the form of five frost-free years. Other farmers on the tableland were less fortunate.

Nor is there much reliance on rain. An outstanding feature of their ven-

ture is a computerised fertigation system which ensures the plants get moisture and nutrient needs via drip irrigation lines.

Dick Jaques says it takes one man less than two hours a week to water and fertilise the 40ha block. Nutrients are dissolved in the water and it is then simply a matter of programming the system by punching a few buttons on a control panel. The coffee bushes are watered three times a week and there is a constant check on their nutrient supply. Wastage is cut to a minimum.

Although the plants are growing in soil, it was really a hydroponic system,