



● Some of Paul Scopelliti's easy-peel oranges are grown under shade mesh or "hail net" near Merbein. Picture: STACEY MERLIN

AN ORANGE THAT'S SO APPEALING

CONSUMERS have developed a taste for Paul Scopelliti's easy-peel oranges.

Mr Scopelliti said acceptance was growing rapidly for the premium quality Ryan navels being marketed as Koala Easy Peel by his family.

They produce about 20,000 cases of the variety a year and there are plans to boost that to between 60,000 and 80,000 cases.

The family has about 40ha of Ryan navels, developed over the past seven years. Some are new plantings and others grafted on to valencia and leng trees.

Mr Scopelliti and his brothers Vince and Greg trade as Belvedere

Fruit Growers. He said all up, the family had about 200 ha of citrus and vines and with other leased properties their holdings stretch from Karadoc and Iraak to Buronga, Mourquong and Merbein.

Other citrus varieties provide a good spread over the season.

Near Merbein they have about 40 ha of citrus, avocados and mangos under shade mesh or "hail net".

The micro-environment provided by the net is already paying dividends in higher fruit quality and accelerated production from young trees.

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An orange of appeal

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Various colours, red, grey and white are being compared to determine their impact on tree viability, water consumption, fruit maturity, colour and management inputs.

Red net seems to hasten fruit maturity while grey seems to slow it down.

All reduce sunburn, frost risk and wind and hail damage.

A characteristic of the Ryan navel is it is vulnerable to blemish and requires extra care.

"In its favour, it is a good-sized fruit that is sweet, low acid and easy to peel," Paul said.

"You can eat the fruit with minimal mess.

"We get a lot in the 40 to 48 count range (pieces of fruit in a 30-litre carton weighing 20kg).

"People like the large fruit — particularly the Vietnamese.

"With the net, we're aiming for a near-perfect pack-out. We're achieving premium class fruit — lesser grades with blemish

might taste as good, but the market marks it down.

"The lack of acid means the elderly can happily eat this variety — we've trialled our Koala Easy Peels in homes for the aged and schools with a great response.

"We'd like more locals to give this fruit a try and get enthusiastic — the best form of marketing you can have."

The net over the citrus groves costs \$35,000 to \$45,000 a hectare to install while the cost of planting trees and irrigation systems is another \$25,000 a hectare.

"Then you have to wait six or eight years to get into reasonable production," Mr Scopelliti said.

"In a hail storm, the net could pay for itself in one year.

"Under the netting, the young trees develop quicker, are happier, are producing marketable fruit two years earlier, and are producing five times the volume of the same variety planted, on the same day, outside."