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Farmers such as Paul Scopellitti exemplify the spirit of *The Weekly Times* Farm Business Awards.

The awards, which are run in conjunction with the Royal Agricultural Society of Victoria, aim to uncover and honour the best farm businesses in the country.

The competition is open to farmers in seven categories — cropping, dairying, horticulture, sheep, beef, alternative farming and young farmer of the year — which will be judged by separate panels. The list of finalists for the Farm Business of the Year award will be drawn from these categories and judged by a panel of farming experts.

The major award — the Farm Business of the Year — will win \$10,000.

Sponsors, which include CASE IH, Genetics Australia, Bayer CropScience, the Department of Primary Industries, Inletc Pivot and Rural Finance, will provide a total prize cash pool of \$28,000.

Entries are now open for the 2007 Awards and farmers can nominate themselves by phoning the RAS on (03) 9281 7444 or email farmbusinessawards@rasv.com.au



Under cover: Sunraysia fruit grower Paul Scopellitti in his orchard, where he grows Koala Easy Peel navel oranges under coloured nets.

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Navel post net profit

By SANDRA GODWIN

AS an orange, the ryan navel wasn't all that bad. Consumers liked it because it was flavoursome, peeled easily and segmented cleanly with little mess.

But the variety developed a poor reputation because the fruit was relatively soft and the skin was prone to scarring. It further declined in popularity when some growers insisted on picking it prematurely in an attempt to cash-in on higher early-season prices.

Undeterred, Sunraysia citrus grower Paul Scopelliti decided the variety's selling points outweighed the negatives and looked for ways to make it work for his Belvedere Farms operation.

One of the major changes was to grow the oranges under nets, to minimise the effects of climatic extremes.

"During the past five or six years we've reworked a lot of valencias and put in a lot of younger plantings on

vacant land," Paul said.

"We now have about 40ha of easy-peel navels on five different blocks around the district, and about half are under nets.

"We've also used cultural practices to improve the skin quality.

"We use gibberellic acid to delay maturity and improve skin condition for export and, instead of packing the fruit in a conventional box, we use bubble-wrap in the bottom of a two-layer tray.

"We also hand-label individual pieces of fruit."

The name Koala Easy Peel Navel Oranges is used to market class-one fruit — and differentiate it from other brands — while lesser-grade fruit sells simply as easy-peel navels.

"I chose the ryan navel — which is available from May to September — because of its positive characteristics: early maturity, big, sweet and obviously easy to peel," Paul said.

"Most people see oranges as a messy fruit. Mandarins are popular because they're easy to peel, so a lot of people can't be bothered eating oranges.

"I still grow other oranges but once people buy these, then they come back for them.

"Our target market started out with kids as our primary focus, but we really see it as a fruit to be enjoyed by the young and even the very old."

Paul said another selling point of the variety was that it had the lowest acid content of any navel on the market.

The oranges have been sold to New Zealand, Western Australia and Queensland, through markets in Sydney and Melbourne, as well as to independent retailers in Victoria and Coles stores in most states.

Belvedere Farms purchased a citrus packing shed at Cardross last year.

A production manual, strict quality

standards and supply chain have been put in place, but supermarket contracts will have to wait until production levels reach those needed to consistently supply sufficient quantities of fruit.

"In the next four to five years, we hope to have tripled production and possibly taken on other growers under the Koala Easy Peel plan, if they want to come on board," Paul said.

The trees — the oldest of which are only three years — are expected to this year yield 20,000 14kg boxes, significantly more than last season's crop which was reduced by sunburn and frost.

"Last year we had hardly any covered fruit," Paul said.

"On one farm we didn't pick at all because the frost dried out the fruit."

Once the current construction project is finished, Belvedere Farms will have about 100ha of orchards covered by

nets. The move comes with a hefty price tag of about \$35,000-\$40,000 a hectare but Paul says the nets soon pay for themselves.

The nets should have a lifespan of 10-12 years, while the timber frames could last for 30 years or more.

"Until now, we've had mostly young trees, so we haven't had the returns," Paul said.

"But had we had nets last year, with the frosts, it would have helped pay for them quickly.

"By the fifth or sixth year, we estimate we will have recouped our costs. A greenfields site takes longer because there is no income for the first couple of years, but they come into production a lot earlier than uncovered trees."

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Bases covered: the nets not only protect the fruit but help the trees to cope with temperature extremes.

Navel oranges post a net profit for Paul

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The benefits of netting deciduous fruit trees — such as apples, pears and stone fruit — are well documented, with studies in Israel and Australia finding the trees are more water efficient and cope better with temperature extremes.

The nets help improve flowering, fruit set, fruit size, colour and internal quality, as well as offering

protection against damage from hail, frost, wind and birds.

But Paul said there had been little research done on the performance of citrus under nets, apart from some projects he saw in New Zealand and the US two years ago.

One of the Belvedere Farms orchards near Merbein, between Lake Rumburda and Lake Hawthorn,

is currently being used as a trial site to test the merits of different coloured nets in different gauges on a variety of grape and tree crops.

The patchwork of red, white and grey nets, with higher-density black side cloth, has become something of a landmark for pilots flying in the area.

Netted fruit is naturally sweeter because of the longer fruit development period, but red nets — which change the light that reaches the fruit — are thought to give it a more intense colour and even higher sugar levels.

Belvedere Farms is run by Paul and his wife, Nancy, with the help of Paul's brothers, Greg and Vince, and a team of farm managers and staff.

The company owns and manages properties totaling 200ha in the district.

As well as the easy-peel navel oranges, there are

groves of Washington and Lane navels, imperial mandarins, lemons, blood oranges and grapefruit, vineyards containing seven varieties of table grapes and eight varieties of wine grapes, hass and Reed avocados and 3ha of mangoes that were planted under nets two years ago.

Trial plots include peaches, plums, nectarines, lychees, passionfruit, figs, kiwifruit and pomegranates — both under net and exposed to the elements — and Paul plans to put in some cherries this year.

Paul, who started working on the family farm at Karadoc after he left school in 1982, said he had chosen to specialise in tree crops, rather than the vegetables for which his parents, Paolo and Letteria, became so well known.

“Vegetables are just too volatile now,” Paul said.