

# Turning kiwifruit into Gold in Hawke's Bay

Story by Rose Mannering

**H**awke's Bay kiwifruit grower John Ericksen would prefer to stay out of the spotlight but he's too good for that!

His orcharding prowess and inventive nature earned him the Hawke's Bay Fruitgrowers' Association Fourneau Award for inventiveness this year.

John is a second-generation kiwifruit grower at Korokipo, between Taradale and Fernhill on the Heretaunga Plains. His willingness to explore alternative methods has earned him the district's "kiwifruit grower of the year" title numerous times for both his Green and Gold crops

His father Eric and uncle Peter were dairy farmers at Waima until 1984 when they sold their cows. Their first foray into the

hairy crop began in 1980 when they planted their first Hayward vines.

The kiwifruit tradition has been continued by their respective sons, John and Mark. The neighbouring cousins now operate separate properties, John having Waima Orchards and Mark the Waima fruit Co.

## Orchard all Gold

This year John is putting all of his eggs in the Gold kiwifruit basket, removing apples and Green kiwifruit so the entire 35 hectare property will next year be in Zespri® Gold. John and orchard manager Campbell Tacon have a great deal of faith in their ability to produce top Gold fruit.

*Frost protection of Gold vines shown on 24 August 2006. Water was used at 3mm/h for 9 hours with a low temp of about -6°C. This Gold block is 80m wide by 1200m long. Photo by Campbell Tacon*



They focus on producing early, high dry matter fruit and collect Zespri bonus payouts for their efforts. For the last two years they have been the first orchard in New Zealand to be given the go-ahead to pick, but this year were pipped by a Gisborne grower.

Harvesting normally begins in Week 12 (the main crop nationally is picked from Week 17 onwards), and Waima receives the Zespri KiwiStart early bonus, and a dry matter compensation bonus. Inputs like water management, summer pruning and crop load are managed to maintain their early niche market production.

Their top block has a production of 13,500 trays a hectare and they believe in time they will be able to reach Bay of Plenty's top production levels of 18,000 trays a hectare. In spite of the lower volumes, the early maturity and high dry matter of the crop puts their orchard in the top bracket as one of the higher returning orchards in New Zealand.

Quality of the fruit is a big focus for both John and Campbell and they aim to tick all of the parameters set by Zespri: taste, early maturity, size, and Brix levels.

### Overhead netting pays dividends

The biggest limiting factor to growing high quality fruit in Hawke's Bay, especially Gold, has been wind. In 2004 the orchard suffered big crop losses due to wind damage (mostly through rubbing on the skin causing cosmetic damage).

John estimates 50% of the crop were lost in this particular year. He made the decision to begin with a full vertical and horizontal netting programme in 2005 to mitigate the wind risk. His Waima orchard was one of the first kiwifruit blocks to undertake full overhead netting.

John visited a blueberry block at Flaxmere near Hastings that was fully netted before making the decision to adopt the same technology on his own property. The netting is not cheap: John estimates it has cost him \$40,000 a hectare and building the frame around an existing orchard was not easy.

He chose an Australian product, Net Pro, and says the use of the netting has also brought other added benefits. The net also provides protection from hail, sunburn, reduces evapotranspiration and helps to keep birds out of the block (birds eat flower buds and green foliage in spring).

John believes the environment for the plants under the net is healthier, with some of the harshness of Hawke's Bay light removed before it hits the fruit.

Because there is no longer a need for rows of shelter trees, the whole area can be planted in vines, and the block has less



**Orchard manager Campbell Tacon with John Ericksen. At rear, apple removal to make way for Gold, which will be the only crop at Waima. Photo by Andrew Miller**

variability as there are no longer as many "outside rows". The netting is guaranteed for 10 years, and John is hoping to get at least 15 years' life from it.

### Remaining areas turned to Gold

A seven hectare block of apples of Royal Gala, Braeburn and Fuji was removed after harvest this year. John was successful in obtaining more Zespri® Gold production licence, which has enabled him to turn this final area of his orchard over to Gold. The new plantings will also be covered with net.

A 10.5 hectare block of Green kiwifruit was last year grafted to Gold, lower down the vine. This enabled the harvest of a final crop of Green fruit this year, while at the same time growing and training the new Gold canes on strings above the green canopy. After harvest all of the green wood will be pruned out and the new Gold canes laid down for next year's production. John says it will only take a couple of years before reasonable volumes of Gold are produced using this replacement method.

### Inventive streak

As the old saying goes "necessity is the mother of invention". Where John sees a need, his inventive nature gets the better of him. He has devised a number of labour and time-saving devices on the orchard and is particularly pleased with his latest effort, a pump with an electronic timer on it to enable him to adjust the amount of sugar solution fed to bees during pollination in the orchard. Arataki Honey has put plugs in the top of the hives to make it quicker to use the new gadget.

He has developed new bin trailers to streamline his orchard operation, and cut down the number of tractors needed in the orchard. Another invention is a double-sided girdling tool to speed up the girdling process.

He is coy about his many inventions, and is happy to share them with other growers. Some of his ideas have been manufactured commercially but he is happy to focus his efforts on the orchard.

John is a strong Zespri supporter, and views with concern other companies developing variants of the Gold kiwifruit to market under their own banner. 🌿