

A close-up photograph of vibrant green vegetable leaves, likely from a brassica family, covered in numerous small, glistening water droplets. The leaves are layered, with some in sharp focus and others blurred in the background, creating a sense of depth. The lighting is soft, highlighting the texture of the leaf surfaces and the veins. The overall color palette is various shades of green, from deep forest green to bright, fresh green.

GROWER SUCCESS STORIES

REAL RESULTS FROM THE VEGETABLE R&D LEVY

Every year Hort Innovation, using the vegetable research and development (R&D) levy and contributions from the Australian Government, invests vital funding in grower-driven R&D projects that aim to ensure the long-term sustainability of the vegetable industry and its growers.

In the pages ahead, you will find examples of growers from around the country who have enjoyed real benefits and success as a result of their involvement in a range of strategic levy investment projects under the Hort Innovation Vegetable Fund, as well as the Hort Frontiers strategic partnership initiative developed by Hort Innovation.

The Hort Frontiers strategic partnership initiative facilitates collaborative cross-industry investments that focus on longer-term, complex and traditionally underinvested themes that are critical for the future of Australian horticulture. Leadership has been identified as an important area of investment, and Lisa Brassington from Peninsula Fresh Organics in Victoria was one of the first members of the vegetable industry to complete the Masterclass in Horticultural Business under the Hort Frontiers Leadership Fund. She shares her feedback on how the masterclass has empowered her to apply what she has learned from the course directly into the business.

On-farm, the Soil Wealth program has continued to enhance grower education about the importance of soil health and the role it plays in crop productivity and efficiency. Jamie Jurgens hosted successful demonstration sites for the project on his farm in Bowen, Queensland, and he explains how he used the knowledge gained from the project to improve the health of his soils.

Continuing on the farm, Steve Allie and Maureen Dobra have battled weeds on their property in Western Australia for many years. Since their involvement in the Integrated Weed Management project, they have been able to identify the weeds on their properties

and implement new strategies to manage them following discussions with other growers involved in the project.

On the topic of knowledge extension, the National Vegetable Extension Network (VegNET) continues to communicate existing R&D information to growers, researchers and other supply chain members. Brothers Val and Sam Micallef have been working closely with Local Land Services in New South Wales, and Val has been an enthusiastic participant in the VegNET project with outstanding results.

There are far-reaching benefits for vegetable levy funding, with investment being made to enhance the industry's overall knowledge and awareness of export opportunities. John Said and Julien Palamara from Fresh Select in Victoria have worked closely with the Vegetable Industry Export Program and they spoke about the opportunities to access resources, host international buyers on their farm and attend fresh produce trade shows overseas.

Once again, the opportunity for levy-paying growers to visit leading vegetable farms overseas has delivered worthwhile results. Josh Wing was one of 14 growers and industry members who visited a range of New Zealand horticultural operations in 2016 and has plans to apply the knowledge gained from this experience to his current agronomist role at Harvest Moon in Tasmania.

It is extremely pleasing to showcase the achievements of these growers and I look forward to seeing more real-world results from ongoing strategic levy investment in the vegetable industry in years to come.



Yours sincerely,

Selwyn Snell

Chairman
Hort Innovation



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PO Box 138, Camberwell VIC Australia 3124
Email: info@ausveg.com.au
Phone: 03 9882 0277
Website: ausveg.com.au



L-R: Julien Palamara and John Said. Photography by Luka Kauzlaric, words by Ross McGravie.



JOHN SAID

A KNOWLEDGE BUSINESS

If knowledge is power, John Said and his team at Fresh Select are well on the way to establishing a sustainable export business.

John, Fresh Select CEO, and his Chief Financial Officer Julien Palamara believe their understanding of the Hong Kong, Malaysian and Singapore markets has been crucial in having their broccoli, cauliflower and iceberg lettuce stocked in premium supermarkets.

They knew, for example, that gaining trust in the sophisticated, health-conscious markets was as much about ensuring Australia's reputation for food safety was upheld by a stringent supply chain process as it was building a trusted brand through consistent size, appearance and quality of produce, packaging and presentation.

The only element missing was knowing how and where to gain a bigger foothold.

"We have learnt much over the past three years, but we have always been focused on what the market wanted and had the discipline to deliver the quality that consumers demand," John says.

That's why they looked into the *Vegetable Industry Export Program* (VG16061), a strategic levy investment under the Hort Innovation Vegetable Fund. This project is coordinated by AUSVEG and includes a wide range of activities that aim to improve the industry's export capabilities, such as export readiness training, international market development activities and market access representation and prioritisation.

Julien says the AUSVEG Export Development team, Michael Coote and Andrea Lin, have been invaluable in creating networking opportunities at events such as the Asia Fruit Logistica trade show in Hong Kong.

"Andrea and Michael have so much knowledge on who to meet with in each market and how to make it happen. We really can't speak highly enough of the experience," he says.

"They are almost like matchmakers in how they bring suppliers and buyers together."

A SHOW OF FAITH

Perhaps the best display of the project's influence was hosting over 20 international fresh produce buyers at Fresh Select's Werribee South farm in June 2016 as part of a Reverse Trade Mission.

"At a trade show you have about 90 seconds to sell your services, but to be given the buyer introduction at your HQ is key," Julien says.

"A picture truly tells a thousand words and having an hour in which buyers are able to see your product, touch it and feel it, and to see how everything comes together, you get so much more engagement."

WE HAVE LEARNT MUCH OVER THE PAST THREE YEARS, BUT WE HAVE ALWAYS BEEN FOCUSED ON WHAT THE MARKET WANTED AND HAD THE DISCIPLINE TO DELIVER THE QUALITY THAT CONSUMERS DEMAND.

KICKING EXPORT GOALS

With a dedicated quality assurance team maintaining SQF, a Global Food Safety Initiative benchmarked system, Fresh Select's hand-selected crops are nurtured from seed to delivery in open field and protected cropping sites across Australia. They can be vacuum cooled in 20 minutes before being sent to Singapore in the same time that it takes to dispatch produce to Sydney.

Such speed speaks volumes about efficiency, but Julien is content to slowly continue building relationships through the Vegetable Industry Export Program, safe in the knowledge that fresh will always be best.

"Exports are not going to happen overnight, but year on year we're getting more traction and there's scope to do more as supply chains across Asia improve their awareness around the capability of Australian producers," he says.

SUMMARY

- Project VG16061 provides growers with a range of capability building activities such as export readiness training, accessing key export markets and opportunities for growers to develop export trade, with the ultimate aim of improving farm profitability.
- John Said and Julien Palamara from Fresh Select in Victoria have benefited from their involvement in the program and have accessed resources, hosted international buyers through the Reverse Trade Mission and attended international fresh produce trade shows such as Foodex.
- *Vegetable Industry Export Program* has been funded by Hort Innovation using the vegetable research and development levy and contributions from the Australian Government.



Photography by Chris Kershaw

STEVE ALLIE

GROWER FOCUS ON WEEDS REAPS REWARDS

Making weed management a key on-farm priority has already resulted in future cost-benefits for Western Australian vegetable growers, The Loose Leaf Lettuce Company.

Since its establishment in 1996, the business has been steadily expanding its production of baby leaf lettuce, spinach, rocket and Asian green vegetable varieties. Given the highly intensive nature of these crops and the two-week turnaround between harvesting and planting, weed management on the property is essential.

Weeds are a burden on vegetable growing operations globally and require constant attention and careful management. If not dealt with effectively, they can have a devastating effect on crop profitability, yield and quality.

A BIG BENEFIT OF WEED MANAGEMENT IS ALSO BUG MANAGEMENT. IF YOU CAN KEEP THOSE WEEDS DOWN, YOU CAN KEEP THOSE INSECTS DOWN.

In light of this, The Loose Leaf Lettuce Company has been involved in the project, *A strategic approach to weed management for the Australian Vegetable Industry* (VG15070), a strategic levy investment under the Hort Innovation Vegetable Fund.

Farm manager Steve Allie and part-owner Maureen Dobra have been working closely with project coordinator Christine Fyfe from the University of New England's School of Environmental and Rural Science to discover what weeds are present on their two Gingin properties and the most effective ways to manage them.

Through networking and involvement in strategic levy investment projects, Steve and Maureen have been able to make short- and long-term implementation plans for the business.

KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER

Weed management workshops that were held as part of the project have allowed Steve and Maureen to build their networks and benefit from the knowledge and advice of other growers. This occurred at a recent workshop where a grower recommended less use of metham sodium as a weed management procedure.

"The way we put metham sodium into the ground is quite cost-effective; however the grower was talking about the rate that he uses and perhaps if we looked at using a lesser rate, it would be more financially viable for us," Maureen says.

"When the grower was talking about how beneficial the cover crops are and the different varieties, he said it wasn't necessary for us to let cover crops grow to maturity if we have cover crops at any time - that was a good point as well," Steve adds.

LONG-TERM VISION

The presence of stable fly in Western Australia prompted Steve and Maureen to implement a weed management plan on their farm. It is a serious issue for Gingin in particular, and affects farmers that have cattle, horses and beef.

"A big benefit of weed management is also bug management. If you can keep those weeds down, you can keep those insects down," Steve says.

The benefits of managing weeds isn't restricted to crop profitability either - it can reduce labour costs significantly.

"Labour is quite a huge part of our expense. If we don't have weeds, it means we don't have to use the labour to weed a crop or take weeds out of the product when we are washing out lettuces and salads," Maureen says.

When it comes to managing weeds, Steve and Maureen say that "persistence is key", and they encourage other vegetable growers to take advantage of current industry research and share information with each other.

"The more we learn and the more we participate in research projects, the more we know," Maureen adds.

SUMMARY

- Project VG15070 allowed The Loose Lettuce Company Farm Manager Steve Allie and part-owner Maureen Dobra to assess the current weeds on their property in Western Australia and receive advice on effective management.
- Managing weeds has on-farm production benefits and can lessen business costs such as labour.
- Steve and Maureen have participated in workshops as part of the project where they have developed networks with other growers and discussed different weed management options.
- *A strategic approach to weed management for the Australian Vegetable Industry* has been funded by Hort Innovation using the vegetable research and development levy and contributions from the Australian Government.



JAMIE JURGENS

FOCUS ON SOIL SUSTAINABILITY

Soil health has been a focus of far-north Queensland vegetable grower Jamie Jurgens and his family since they established Jurgens Produce in Bowen in 1975.

According to Jamie, Bowen isn't renowned for great soil – therefore, to be sustainable and keep businesses financially viable in the long-term, growers have to be smart when it comes to what they are putting in the ground.

Through his involvement in the project *Soil condition management – Extension and capacity building* (VG13076), a strategic levy investment under the Hort Innovation Vegetable Fund, Jamie has been able to quantify the biological improvement in the soil health of his crops, which include green beans, pumpkin, capsicum, eggplant and tomatoes, over a number of years.

IT HAS TAKEN US 40 YEARS TO GET TO WHERE WE ARE, BUT WE CAN'T ALLOW EVERYONE ELSE TO TAKE 40 YEARS TO GET TO WHERE THEY NEED TO BE.

IMPROVING SOIL HEALTH

The Soil Wealth project works with vegetable growers nationally to provide R&D extension services, products and communication on improved soil management.

“With the advent of adding in some bacteria and fungi and trying to build the microflora of the soil, we were able to prove that we have better soil structures, better plants and also an increased level of minerals in

our crops. This ensures that we farm in a sustainable way,” Jamie says.

GETTING INVOLVED IN R&D

Jamie stressed the importance of growers participating in a levy-funded project such as Soil Wealth, which was jointly run by Applied Horticultural Research and RM Consulting Group over three years.

“We're farmers. To be involved with the researchers on this project was a great benefit to us as a business, that's for sure,” he says.

“It allowed us to have the confidence to expand our production to the extent where we can now market a better product for the end user. This is because of higher mineral levels, having a safer product and being able to have the confidence to grow more acres in a sustainable way.”

ON-FARM LEARNING

During the Soil Wealth project, Jurgens Produce hosted on-farm demonstrations, which proved insightful for both Jamie and the attendees.

“The biggest thing about this project is getting information out there and helping growers to understand it,” he explains.

“One thing that we learned was that there is a lot of room for improvement in the mainstream production at the moment when it comes to soil health and seeing soil as a future asset of your business.

“It has taken us 40 years to get to where we are, but we can't allow everyone else to take 40 years to get to where they need to be.”

The on-farm demonstrations focused on the whole farming system, including controlled traffic and adding compost and biology to the soil. Attendees were then able to garner the information to see what they could implement on their own farms.

“There's not just one single fix towards soil health; it's a mindset change,” Jamie says.

“If people took away something from those demonstrations, it was the fact that they've got to open their mind up and have a look within their business and how they might fix it.

“Once you get everything right in the soil and the crops grow properly, the rest can take care of itself.”

SUMMARY

- Through his involvement in the Soil Wealth project (VG13076), Queensland grower Jamie Jurgens was able to use biological strategies to strengthen the soil structure, increase quality and yield, expand production and ultimately improve farm sustainability.
- During the project, Jamie hosted on-farm demonstrations which proved beneficial for both himself and those who attended. It provided an open platform to share information and allow other growers to see the benefits of soil health R&D in action.
- *Soil condition management – Extension and capacity building* (the Soil Wealth project) has been funded by Hort Innovation, using the vegetable research and development levy and contributions from the Australian Government.



L-R: Sam and Val Micallef. Photography by John McRae.

VAL & SAM MICALLEF

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES PROVIDE A BOOST FOR BROTHERS

Val Micallef and his brother Sam are progressive second-generation vegetable growers located at Agnes Banks in the Richmond region of New South Wales, 60 kilometres north-west of Sydney.

The modest pair manage Alandale Produce, which predominantly grows lettuce, cauliflower, cabbage, leek, potatoes and sweet corn, and they have shown great innovation on their property. The Micallef brothers have been heavily involved in strategic levy investment projects over the years, and most recently they have hosted trial sites and farm walks alongside Greater Sydney Local Land Services.

These initiatives form part of the *Regional capacity building to grow vegetable businesses - national coordination and linkage project* (VG15049), otherwise known as the National Vegetable Extension Network, or VegNET. This project is a strategic levy investment under the Hort Innovation Vegetable Fund, and was established to effectively extend important R&D information to vegetable growers throughout the country.

The VegNET team for New South Wales has two Region Industry Development Officers, Bill Dixon and Matthew Plunkett from Local Land Services, who have been assisting Val and Sam in achieving their on-farm goals.

INDUSTRY CONTRIBUTION

It is Val and Sam's thirst for new information, often provided to the brothers by VegNET officers, that has led to their participation and success in the project's activities.

"It's trial and error. Some things work and some things don't, but over time you can get it better," Val says.

Most recently the growers have hosted a trial site for a compost project managed by Local Land Services. The pair also held a farm walk in

December 2016, which attracted around 15 growers and industry members, and focused on machinery and the softest way of working the ground. Attendees were able to understand the various impacts on soil of harvesting with tools such as a rotary hoe, power harrow and spadder.

LOOKING FORWARD

Val and Sam are always looking to incorporate new technologies onto their farm, and they have recently automated their irrigation system with great results.

IT'S TRIAL AND ERROR. SOME THINGS WORK AND SOME THINGS DON'T, BUT OVER TIME YOU CAN GET IT BETTER.

They have shown a keen interest to participate in other strategic levy investment projects for the vegetable industry, including as a potential trial site for robotics systems developed at the University of Sydney. They have also indicated their willingness to join another project that focuses on the adoption of precision systems technology in vegetable production.

Val and Sam also attended a low cost protected cropping farm walk at the Local Land Services demonstration farm in Richmond and are looking at these cover crops to trial on early season sweet corn.

ON-FARM ACHIEVEMENTS

The automation of the Micallef's irrigation system has led to a reduced cost of labour, while Val says that the compost project resulted in reduced total fertiliser input and has saved water.

"Our soil is pretty sandy so we're just trying to build it up. It's holding moisture better now and retaining the fertiliser; it's not leaking out as much and the crops are more uniform across the field," he says.

Val added that VegNET is very important to his business, given the wide range of R&D information that it provides to growers. He is confident that being involved in these extension activities will ensure the long-term sustainability of Alandale Produce.

"Hopefully by being involved in the VegNET project, the farm is getting better and the crops are improving," Val says.

SUMMARY

- Project VG15049 was established to effectively extend important research-based information to vegetable growers across the country.
- Val and Sam Micallef have been working closely with VegNET New South Wales Region Industry Development Officers from Greater Sydney Local Land Services to achieve their on-farm goals.
- Through VegNET, Val and Sam have hosted trial sites, attended farm walks and automated their irrigation system, ensuring the long-term sustainability of their business.
- *Regional capacity building to grow vegetable businesses - national coordination and linkage project* (VegNET) has been funded by Hort Innovation, using the vegetable research and development levy and contributions from the Australian Government.



JOSH WING

A PRECISE UNDERSTANDING OF NEW ZEALAND VEG PRODUCTION

Tasmanian agronomist Josh Wing clearly recognises the benefits of visiting vegetable farms and industry members overseas.

In 2013, he travelled to the United States on a study tour of key vegetable growing areas as part of a strategic levy investment project, and the knowledge he gained from that experience still resonates today.

Last year, to expand his knowledge in precision vegetable production, Josh participated in another grower mission – this time, to New Zealand.

Harvest Moon – where Josh works as a senior agronomist for carrots, onions, swedes and beans – has incorporated some precision agriculture techniques into its daily operations. As these techniques were implemented before Josh joined the company, he jumped at the opportunity to learn more about their application in New Zealand.

IT WAS GOOD TO LOOK AT ANOTHER BRANCH OF HORTICULTURE TO GET IDEAS ON HOW WE CAN IMPROVE ON WHAT WE DO WITH VEGETABLES.

The *Grower study tour of New Zealand – Precision vegetable production* (VG15704) was a strategic levy investment under the Hort Innovation Vegetable Fund. It took 14 participants from Queensland, Victoria and Tasmania on a 10-day study tour of fully integrated businesses, farms and organic growing operations, as well as packing sheds on New Zealand's North Island.

The study tour focused on precision ag techniques including soil mapping and strategic sampling

programs, yield monitoring, prescription mapping and variable rate inputs (soil ameliorants, nutrients and irrigation), biomass mapping/crop sensing and minimum or strategic tillage.

LESSONS FROM ACROSS THE DITCH

Josh developed a wealth of knowledge during the study tour and says the highlights included observing the land management system in place at the A.S. Wilcox & Sons packing facility in Pukekohe near Auckland. This is a fully integrated chain that grows, packs, markets and exports carrots, onions and potatoes.

"We saw how they were using drones and the imagery they were capturing, as well as yield mapping that was happening in New Zealand," Josh says.

Another highlight was a visit to one of the Zespri kiwi fruit pack houses in Mount Maunganui, which demonstrated the cross-benefits of sharing knowledge in horticultural production.

"It was good to look at another branch of horticulture to get ideas on how we can improve on what we do with vegetables," Josh says.

While Harvest Moon is currently using drones and land management systems in many parts of the business, Josh plans to implement yield mapping into the operation's carrot program in December 2017 as a result of participating on the study tour.

EXPANDING NETWORKS

Participants quickly realised they had many areas of mutual interest and have kept in contact since the study tour concluded. This has helped to develop an informal 'community of practice' that connects a broad mix of vegetable producers who are using precision technologies and practices.

"There were many participants from Queensland and I think us all getting together with growers from interstate and going on a study tour overseas improved the way that we network," Josh says.

"I've probably learnt as much from the Queensland growers in the end as I did from the visit to New Zealand.

"I've kept in touch with everyone on that study tour, even a couple from Tasmania who I hadn't met personally before that trip. We talk about what the next step is for all of us as an industry."

SUMMARY

- Project VG15704 provided an opportunity for 14 representatives from Queensland, Victorian and Tasmanian vegetable growing businesses to visit fully integrated farms, organic growing operations and packing sheds in New Zealand.
- Josh Wing, from Harvest Moon in Tasmania, attended the study tour and expanded his knowledge of precision agriculture in New Zealand, and developed strong networks with fellow attendees.
- *Grower study tour of New Zealand – Precision vegetable production* has been funded by Hort Innovation using the vegetable research and development levy, co-investment from the Queensland Department of Agriculture and Fisheries and contributions from the Australian Government.



LISA BRASSINGTON

MASTERING AUSTRALIAN HORTICULTURE

Filling in knowledge gaps and learning about the broader horticulture industry were the reasons behind Victorian market garden employee Lisa Brassington's decision to undertake the *Masterclass in Horticultural Business* (LP15001), a strategic partnership initiative under the Hort Frontiers Leadership Fund.

The masterclass is described as a mini-MBA for the horticulture industry. The 10-month course focuses on several topics, including learning about the global trends in agriculture and horticulture, international business, innovation, value chains, and governance and risk.

Three leading agricultural-focused universities are currently involved in the masterclass, including the Wageningen Research Academy in the Netherlands, New Zealand's Lincoln University and the University of Tasmania.

The vegetable industry has committed funding, as part of a strategic levy investment, to provide a \$10,000 scholarship to up to 15 eligible participants per year. Lisa was one of 21 students to undertake the inaugural masterclass in 2017 after receiving an additional scholarship from AUSVEG to assist her studies.

"I wanted to upskill myself formally - not only for my own knowledge and competency, but to be taken seriously and be welcomed to comment on the industry," she says.

BUSINESS FOCUS

Lisa works in Quality and Land Management at Peninsula Fresh Organics, a certified organic farming business located in Baxter, 60 kilometres south-east of Melbourne.

"The masterclass has enabled me to have better business discussions with my managers/farm owners Wayne and Tash Shields; firstly, to work out how I can help but secondly, to see if they already have these ideas and we can further brainstorm them into action," Lisa says.

"The learning I am applying is anywhere from the contract price points to supply and demand through to gross margin and break even points."

There are two goals that Lisa would like to achieve as a result of completing the masterclass. One is to help facilitate and encourage business growth and business planning discussions within Peninsula Fresh Organics.

THE MASTERCLASS HAS ENABLED ME TO HAVE BETTER BUSINESS DISCUSSIONS WITH MY MANAGERS/FARM OWNERS...

"That will only lead to efficiency and having a clearer competitive advantage by really knowing our next phase of business and related business plans," Lisa says.

"From a staff point of view, I aim to work on new business pre-feasibility and the groundwork before my manager needs to consult with an external set of professionals so I can save on-farm input costs and farm consultancy fees."

The course has also given Lisa the encouragement to health-check the current varieties the business grows.

"We have market advantages in some areas that perhaps can be marketed better and build a varied group of domestic and export client relationships," she explains.

"I often contemplate if our current and future customers really understand the stand-out quality of product or the unique range of product that we're producing. We could look to a more vertically integrated supply chain, in addition to having loyal seasonal buyers in the mix."

FILLING A VOID

Lisa strongly encourages other vegetable growers to apply for the masterclass, as it provides problem-solving opportunities, new knowledge and even the ability to fast-track the expansion of a small start-up enterprise.

"This is definitely the missing gap between learning on the farm, going to industry information sessions and having on-farm support from extension officers," she says.

"It is that middle part that makes you a professional horticultural farm worker who understands the demands of supplying to the Australian or export industry, and where you fit into the supply chain management and logistics within supplying Australian produce."

SUMMARY

- LP15001 is a 10-month masterclass that focuses on several topics, including global trends in agriculture and horticulture, international business, innovation, value chains, and governance and risk.
- Lisa Brassington from Peninsula Fresh Organics in Victoria was one of 21 students to undertake the inaugural masterclass in 2017. The course allowed Lisa to upskill and apply her new-found knowledge directly to the business operations.
- *Masterclass in Horticultural Business* is funded by the Hort Frontiers Leadership Fund, part of the Hort Frontiers strategic partnership initiative developed by Hort Innovation, with co-investment from the University of Tasmania and contributions from the Australian Government.