

NEWS FROM MG

GROWER PROFILE

FORESTBURG EGGPLANT

Forestburg's smart growing strategy lifts eggplant profile

From Dutch roses to Kiwi eggplants, one grower's journey is reshaping New Zealand's appetite for aubergines.

Dairy Flat might be a long way from the Netherlands, but for Kees van der Eijk, co-founder of Forestburg Eggplant, the path from European greenhouse precision to New Zealand innovation has been driven through hands-on effort and a willingness to adapt.

"Honestly, I was almost born in a glasshouse," Kees laughs. "My parents grew roses in the Netherlands. I started working weekends and school holidays when I was 12, and kept doing it for 15 years."

Those early years shaped his horticultural outlook, influencing his interest in technology, being hands-on, and a mindset of continuous improvement. When Kees moved to New Zealand and co-founded Forestburg with his brother and a business partner in the early 2000s, they initially grew capsicums. But in 2006, a virus wiped out part of their

crop, triggering a pivot that would ultimately transform New Zealand's eggplant industry.

Back then, eggplants were a niche crop. Only a handful of small-scale growers existed, and most supermarkets had inconsistent supply. Prices were high and availability unreliable.

"We saw a gap," says Kees. "But to be honest, we didn't know much about eggplants at the start, so we grew the same varieties everyone else was using. The trouble was, they were big, 500 to 600 grams. It looked impressive, but wasn't practical and was out of step with other parts of the world."

It didn't take long for Forestburg to realise that what worked in theory didn't work in practice. Large fruit slowed production and didn't suit consumers.

"The thing is, once you cut an eggplant, you need to use it straight away. No one wants to waste half of a 600-gram eggplant," Kees explains. "That's when we started to shift towards 350 to 400 grams. More usable, with less waste."



Main crops grown



Eggplant



➤ Auckland Branch Manager Dominic Gargiulo, Kees van der Eijk and MG Sales Rep Mark Middleton
↑ Kees and Victoria van der Eijk

The change wasn't immediate. It took trialling new varieties and educating buyers, but over time, Forestburg helped move the market toward what is now the norm.

"It probably took a decade," says Kees. "But now, that smaller fruit size is the standard."

Today, Forestburg is the largest producer of eggplants in New Zealand, responsible for approximately 80% of the national production. The business operates year-round from a 43,000 square metre glasshouse, with around 25 staff during peak season.

"It's all about growing smarter," Kees says. "We run different varieties for winter and summer, including northern hemisphere types when the light is low, and southern hemisphere ones when the conditions heat up. You can't just copy Europe. You've got to adapt to local conditions."

That mindset extends across the business. Recent investments have included new irrigation units, water filtration systems, and introducing automation.

"We're slowly replacing older kit. It's about preparing for the next ten years," says Kees. "You've got to keep upgrading to keep your people and your plants happy."

But Forestburg's influence extends beyond the glasshouse. By producing enough volume to guarantee consistent supermarket supply, they've helped make eggplants a regular feature in Kiwi kitchens.

"When you're always on the shelf, people start to get familiar with it," Kees says. "Suddenly you see eggplants on cooking shows and in recipes and it's now become normal. That wouldn't happen if people couldn't find them."

Kees says there's still plenty of consumer education to be done.

"Most people don't know you should never store eggplants in the fridge. Cold temperatures actually damage them."

Some employees at Forestburg, many of whom come from overseas, have also brought new perspectives on how eggplants are used.

"Some of them dry the fruit, which is quite cool. There's a lot more to explore."

Since the beginning, Forestburg has worked closely with the MG Group.

"We've had a great partnership with MG and Mark Middleton in particular," says Kees. "It's one of those relationships where you know you're aligned. We grow it, they get it sold."

That partnership has allowed Kees and his team to focus on what they do best, which is growing, refining, and adapting.

"We're always trialling new varieties," he says. "Not everything works. But the only way to learn is to give it a go. If you try something and it doesn't work, that's fine, you just don't do it again. But you've got to try."

Looking at their journey so far, there's still plenty more to come from Forestburg Eggplants.





THE MG GROUP'S NATIONAL BRANCH NETWORK

↑ From left to right: **Daniel Neumann** Tauranga Branch Manager, **Dominic Gargiulo** Auckland Branch Manager, **Andrew Cross** Nelson Branch Manager, **Willie Little** MG Direct North Island, **Tom Bosworth** Hamilton Branch Manager, **Jake Edwards** Palmerston North Branch Manager, **Ben Ross** Christchurch Branch Manager, **Jade Reeves** GM Operations, **David Freeman** Invercargill Branch Manager, Grant Stumbles Dunedin Assistant Branch Manager, **Brett Reid** Wellington Branch Manager

For more than 100 years, the MG Group's wholesale branch network has played a central role in connecting growers with customers across the country. While the co-operative has evolved in many ways, expanding into growing operations, launching brands, and developing export channels, it is the produce markets that remain the operational heart of the business.

National reach

The MG Group operates a network of nine physical branches, supported by two virtual direct branches. Strategically located across New Zealand, these sites give MG a strong national presence and provide access to a wide mix of sales channels. This includes independent retailers, supermarkets, foodservice providers and hospitality businesses.

Every day, thousands of cartons of fresh produce move through the network. More than 350 staff support this activity, many of them based in branches. Their roles go well beyond logistics. They stay closely connected with growers and customers, respond to changing market needs, and help build strong, lasting relationships that benefit both sides.

Led by a capable team

MG branches are led by highly capable managers who are passionate about what they do. All have come through the business, gaining hands-on experience in a variety of roles, with most starting out in warehousing before progressing through different parts of the operation. Many have developed their careers through the MG Graduate Programme or MG Sales Academy, and now lead teams across the country.

The business is well served by people who care deeply about the produce industry. Just as importantly, these leaders are committed to the future, bringing energy and focus to building on the strong foundations that have already been created over more than a century.



* Member of the Executive Management Team.



↑ Jamie Crawford has recently been appointed as Branch Manager in Dunedin, bringing strong experience and a fresh perspective to the role.



Future focused

As a grower-owned co-operative, the MG Group takes a long-term view and continues to invest in the business to ensure it remains strong for future generations. Recent infrastructure upgrades across several branches, including improvements to refrigeration systems, reflect this commitment. These investments are designed to support product quality, enhance operational efficiency, and ensure the business is well positioned for the years ahead. Energy use is also a key focus, with ongoing work to reduce consumption, manage costs, and support sustainability.

Focus on service

MG operates differently from many other businesses. Owned by more than 400 growers, the group shares its success with its shareholders. While there is no requirement for exclusive supply, MG continues to attract support by consistently delivering value and operating with a long-term focus.

SMARTER FARMING

How AI and Robotics will play a part in the future of horticulture

Artificial Intelligence (AI) might sound like something from science fiction, but it’s already making its way onto farms and orchards. From robot pickers to chatbots trained to offer farm advice, AI has the potential to have a major impact on how we grow, manage, and market our crops.

AI and robotics are already proving useful across the horticultural sector, especially in areas like:



Labour support:

To support on-farm labour, robots are being developed to assist with harvesting, grading and packing. These technologies can help fill labour gaps, improve efficiency and maintain productivity when skilled workers are hard to find.

Real-World Benefits

For growers, the potential advantages of AI include time savings, improved consistency, and the ability to make more informed decisions. Automating repetitive tasks like spraying or monitoring allows more time to be spent on planning and problem-solving. At the same time, machines bring a level of consistency that can improve product quality, helping ensure that crops are cared for in a uniform way, regardless of the time of day or weather conditions. There’s also innovation happening after harvest, with systems being developed to scan produce for quality and ripeness.

Another advantage is the potential to reshape on-farm roles. With automation taking care of some of the manual workload, new positions are emerging, such as drone operators, data analysts, and sustainability coordinators. These shifts could help attract younger people to horticulture by making farm work more technology-focused and business-oriented.



Crop monitoring:

Drones and AI-powered cameras can analyse crop health, detect pests or diseases early, and even help fine-tune irrigation and fertiliser use.

What to Watch Out For

Of course, adopting AI doesn’t come without its challenges. Trust is a big one. Many growers still prefer people over new technology, and for these tools to be truly helpful, it must be simple, reliable, and easy to use. Some tools still feel like they’ve been built by and for tech experts, not growers.

Cost is another barrier. While large operations might be able to invest in robotics and AI platforms, others may find the upfront expense hard to justify. Access to training and support will also be important as more data-based tools enter the market.

Then there’s the question of data itself, including how it’s collected, who owns it, and what it’s used for. As more devices are introduced to monitor crops, soil, and equipment, understanding how your information is being stored and shared becomes essential.



Precision farming:

AI systems are being used to make smarter, data-driven decisions. Some tools interpret imagery to spot patterns a human eye might miss, such as early signs of nutrient deficiency or overwatering.

Looking ahead

AI and robotics are not about removing the need for experienced growers. In fact, it’s the combination of technology and intuition that is likely to deliver better results. AI has the potential to be a useful tool, helping growers fine tune their decisions, better allocate resources, forecast yield with more confidence, and take costs out of their operations.

Like any new tool, it will take time to find what works. But used well, AI could make horticulture more efficient, more sustainable, and better prepared for future challenges.

While there are still barriers to overcome, the direction of travel is clear and that is that technology will continue to play a growing role in how we farm, and the growers who adapt stand to benefit the most.

MAKING ADVICE WORK FOR YOUR FAMILY BUSINESS

Running a family-owned growing operation means wearing a lot of hats. Most days, there is enough on your plate without needing to be an accountant, lawyer or growing consultant too. That is where good advisors come in. But like any partnership, getting the best from an advisor is about more than just paying someone to do a job.

The real value starts when you know exactly what you need. Is it help with the numbers? Planning for succession? Sorting out your structure or systems? Growing advice specific to a crop? The clearer you are about the role, the more likely you are to find the right fit. And when you do, it makes life a lot easier.

Family businesses often come with a few extra layers, so it helps to work with someone who gets that. You want an advisor who understands your business and your goals, and who knows that any external support needs to add real value. They also need to work well with the people in the business, especially when there is family involved.



It is not always about who you have used in the past or who comes recommended by a mate. Take your time, look at their experience and make sure they are genuinely helping you move forward. Good communication, a bit of straight talking and a willingness to listen can make all the difference.

At the MG Group, we know how important it is to have the right people around you. Our teams are here to help growers think through their plans, tackle challenges and build towards a stronger future. We believe in real partnerships that grow over time and help your business succeed.

Kinzett Tomatoes

recognised for environmental innovation



Well done to Kinzett Tomatoes and their partner, Matt Gale Contracting, who took out the Business Innovation Award at the 2025 Marlborough Environment Awards. The team was recognised for their smart use of forestry slash, turning waste wood into a renewable energy source that reduces emissions, lowers costs, and supports local employment. It is a great example of innovation making a real difference.



The recent passing of former CEO and director, Tom Treacy, has given many of us pause for reflection. Tom was a towering figure in the MG Group's history and someone who made a lasting impact on our co-operative and the wider horticulture industry.

Tom joined MG in 1972, following in his father's footsteps in the produce industry. He was a prominent auctioneer before rising through the ranks to lead the Christchurch branch, playing a key role in guiding it through a difficult period and establishing it as a strong force in the South Island market. As General Manager and later CEO, he helped forge what became one of our most significant partnerships with Dole. That move helped transition MG from a regional wholesaler into a national business with stronger relevance to retail customers and a global outlook.

Tom had a big influence on the careers of many people across MG, including my own. He believed in developing people, backing them to grow, and giving them the opportunity to step up. He led with integrity and always put people first. One of his favourite sayings was, "We could run MG from a tent in Hagley Park if you have the right people." It is a simple idea, but one that says a lot about the way he thought, and it still holds true today.

← Bruce Irvine, Tom Treacy, a Dole representative and Brian Gargiulo following the negotiation of a 13 year supply agreement, just outside Santos in the Philippines, 1995

↓ The 2015 Market Gardeners Ltd Board of Directors



What stands out most about Tom's contribution is not only what he achieved, but how forward looking his leadership was. He understood the importance of building strong grower relationships, developing long term customer partnerships and ensuring the co-operative remained competitive through change. Those principles continue to guide us today.

Since the news of his passing, those who worked with him have found themselves thinking about how much of what Tom helped put in place still underpins our success. His work laid foundations that remain as relevant now as they were then.

Tom had an impact on the lives of many and will be remembered fondly at MG and across the industry as an influential leader, a strategic thinker, a strong advocate for growers, and always believing that the right people made all the difference. His legacy lives on in the way we work and the values that continue to guide our co-operative today.

® **Together.Stronger.**



Peter Hendry
Peter Hendry
CEO



The MG Charitable Trust continues to demonstrate its commitment to the development of people in horticulture by backing several new participants through its Grower Education Fund.

At its March meeting, Trustees allocated funding to five individuals taking part in well-regarded training opportunities across management and governance:

- **Rabobank Farm Managers Programme (2025)**
Max Bayley (Bayley Produce) & Summy Yadav (KBL)
- **Rabobank Executive Development Programme (2025-2026)**
Kelvin Bezuidenhout (Blueberry Country)
- **Kellogg Rural Leaders Programme (2025)**
Jessica Ross (Field Biologist)
- **Mayfield Group Governance Development Programme (2025)**
Tom Smith (Smithfield's) & Sarah Lei (Trevelyan's)

Trustees were pleased with the high calibre of applications, noting the continued strong interest in the Grower Education Fund. Feedback from past recipients has been overwhelmingly positive, with participants highlighting the value these programmes bring back to their businesses and the wider industry.

Growers are encouraged to consider applying for future education funding rounds, with the Trust aiming to support individuals who are keen to enhance their leadership, management, or governance skills within horticulture.

**Upcoming
Contestable
Funding Round**

The next meeting of the Trust will be held on **Tuesday 25 November** and will include the only contestable funding round for 2025. Trustees are particularly seeking applications for projects and initiatives that advance the horticulture sector and encourage innovation or long-term benefit.

Applications are open to growers, industry bodies, community groups and others working within the sector.

Applications for the contestable round close on **Friday 14 November**.

For more information and application forms, visit:

www.mggroup.co.nz/mgtrust