mg® NEW ZEALAND fresh produce group

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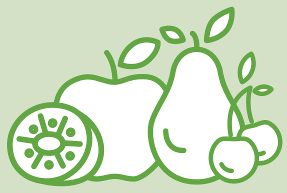
SupplyLine

NEWS FROM MG

GROWER PROFILE | THOMAS BROS ORCHARDS

A family business growing for the long term

Main crops grown



Kiwifruit, apples, pears & cherries

↑ Steve Thomas, Andy Dicks, Zach Zaloum and Paul Thomas

↑ Andy Dicks, Zach Zaloum and Paul Thomas

↑ Steve and Paul Thomas

For Thomas Bros, long term thinking is not measured in years. It is measured in generations.

Based in Riwaka, near the top of the South Island, the Thomas family has been farming the land since 1860. Today, more than 160 years later, the business remains proudly family owned and family led, with fifth and sixth generation family members involved and the seventh generation growing up around the orchard.

The operation now spans more than 150 hectares, including 84 hectares of kiwifruit, 70 hectares of apples and pears and 2.2 hectares of cherries.

Paul Thomas is part of the sixth generation and works as Post Harvest General Manager. His father Fred and uncle Bill remain involved at a governance level, while Paul's cousins Steve and Mark manage the kiwifruit and apple orchard operations.

Everyone has their own area of focus, but Paul says the family still works closely together when important decisions need to be made.

"We have our own space, which I think is important, but we also understand what is going on in the wider areas as well," he says.

That shared approach has helped Thomas Bros continue to evolve. Over the decades, the business has farmed sheep, grown tobacco and other crops, before making a defining shift into kiwifruit in the late 1970s.

Paul says that decision was led by his grandfather, Fred Thomas, who could see tobacco was declining and the business needed a new pathway to support more than one family into the future.

"He did not see a long term future in tobacco," Paul says. "Kiwifruit was coming along then and he could see that it was a potential pathway forward, the most sustainable pathway for the family business."

That willingness to change remains central today. For Thomas Bros, diversification is not about chasing the latest opportunity. It is about building resilience.

Paul says different crops help balance seasonal demands, provide continuity for staff and reduce the risk of relying too heavily on one category.

"We have had seasons where apples have carried the business, and others where kiwifruit has done that job," he says. "It is about not having all our eggs in one basket."

The same long term view shapes how the family thinks about sustainability. For Paul, sustainability is both environmental and commercial. It means caring for the land, while ensuring the business remains viable for future generations.

"We are on the sixth generation and I do not want to be the last one," he says. "We want our future generations to have the same opportunity, to have a lifestyle and make an income off the land."

"We make a lot of our big decisions around the long term," Paul says. "And the long term is not 20 years. The long term is our grandchildren."

Technology is also playing a bigger role in how Thomas Bros manages its orchards and post harvest operations. The business has invested in automation within the kiwifruit packhouse and uses orchard apps to collect data on productivity, costs and crop performance.

Paul says better information leads to better decisions.

"If you measure something, it improves," he says. "If you do not measure it, then it is just someone's opinion as to whether something is working or not. So we measure everything we can."

The packhouse also uses AI trained grading to support fruit quality grading, and Paul expects technology to become even more useful in orchard operations.

He is quick to point out that this is not about replacing people, but about changing roles and helping the business work smarter.

"We started automating our kiwifruit packhouse five years ago and we still employ the same amount of people," he says. "They are just in different areas of the business."

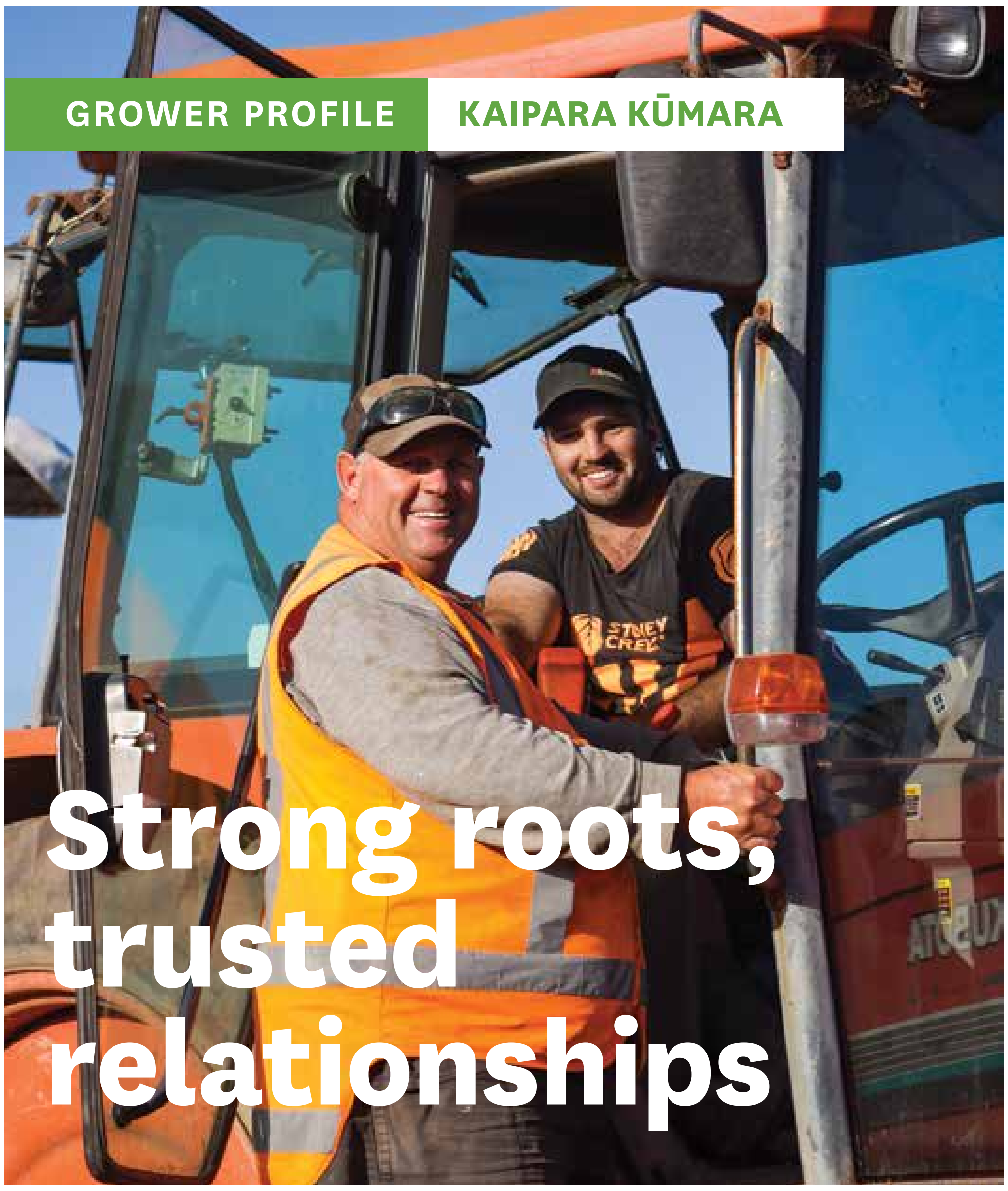
Thomas Bros' relationship with MG Group is another important part of the domestic market picture. Paul says the connection has strengthened in recent years, with MG handling the vast majority of the produce the business sells domestically.

"We trust MG to get a fair value for us," he says. "We leave it to the team to come up with a plan to help us get the most value for our crop."

At the heart of Thomas Bros remains the same steady purpose that has guided the family for generations.

The crops may change, the systems may evolve and the technology may improve, but the focus remains clear. Looking after the land, growing quality fruit and making sure the next generation has the same opportunity to carry the business forward.

GROWER PROFILE | KAIPARA KŪMARA



Strong roots, trusted relationships

On the flat alluvial plains north of the Kaipara Harbour, kūmara is more than a crop. It is part of the region's identity, its economy and its connection to one of New Zealand's most loved vegetables.

For Kaipara Kūmara, that connection has been built over more than five decades. What began as Greenhill Gardens, with a focus on mushroom production, has grown into one of Northland's leading kūmara businesses, supporting growers across the region with advice, product development, packing, branding, marketing, relationship management and distribution.

The story began when the late Gary Blundell relocated his family to Ruawai. Gary, originally a cabinetmaker, had taken on a role managing a mushroom farm in South Auckland during the late 1960s. Supported by local connections who wanted to see the Ruawai township thrive, Gary built a similar facility in Northland.

At the time, the business produced mushrooms, but it was not long before the family was encouraged to try growing pumpkin, which naturally led to planting kūmara. As the 1970s progressed, the business began working with other local kūmara growers to establish a continuous supply.

By the 1980s, the family made the strategic decision to phase out mushrooms and focus entirely on kūmara. The business steadily expanded, setting up New Zealand's first commercial kūmara washing and packing plant in 1991. The company and its growers were also among the first to attain NZGAP accreditation in 1998.

Main crops grown
Kūmara

↑ Kaipara Kūmara shareholder Doug Nilsson with son Ben

↖ MG Representative Andrew Body, Anthony Blundell and Peter Bundell
← Employee operating harvester

In 2002, the business rebranded to Kaipara Kūmara Ltd and invited key growers to purchase shareholdings, placing the company in a stronger position for future growth.

Today, the business operates much like a cooperative, relying on a network of seven key grower suppliers across a production base of around 300 hectares. Anthony Blundell, Gary's son and the current Managing Director, oversees the operation.

The flat alluvial plains and warm weather of the Kaipara region provide ideal growing conditions.

"The high average heat units over a 24 hour period, is where this area gets a bit of an edge," Anthony explains. "Bay of Plenty is around about 5% behind us, and Waikato 15% behind."

Combined with a lack of harsh frosts and good soil, the local environment allows kūmara plants to thrive.

Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, the company invested heavily in upskilling its supply base. A key part of that journey has been Kaipara Kūmara's in house breeding scheme, which was established in 1996. The programme uses micropropagation to support the use of high health kūmara seed by growers in the group. Anthony says the business has also developed a strong relationship with North Carolina State University, drawing on international expertise to help shape its own programme.

"We modelled our micropropagation breeding programme off them," says Anthony. "Our growers are all using this breeding programme, and that is proof of the pudding that it has really done a good job for us."

Operationally, field planting takes place from October through to December, with harvest running from February through to May. Growers store their own crop in on-site facilities, while the Kaipara Kūmara team, supported by more than 30 staff, manages the weekly flow of product.

Knowing the total crop volume in storage allows the team to calculate how many bins need to be moved each week to maintain consistent supply through to the end of January the following year.

"We have been focused on being good relationship managers and knowing our place and our core business," Anthony notes. "I am proud of how we have always operated as a family type business. We rely heavily on our relationships with growers, and the fact there are no contracts reflects how we choose to conduct our business."

While the export market remains challenging due to global competition, Kaipara Kūmara has found significant value domestically, including through fresh supply and processing. Moving forward, Anthony believes the best opportunities for the industry lie in supporting the grower base by minimising costs, improving crop yields and continuing to invest in research.

Now in its 56th year, Anthony says the business remains focused on the relationships that have shaped it.

"I am very proud of the way we conduct our business with our people on site," he says.

Those values also extend to Kaipara Kūmara's partnership with the MG Group. The business works with a wide range of people across MG, including Procurement Manager Andrew Body, and Anthony says the relationship reflects a similar approach to doing business.

"We view MG playing an important role in our future," Anthony explains. "I believe there is great potential to grow the business partnering with MG."

After more than five decades in Ruawai, Kaipara Kūmara remains focused on the future, backed by local knowledge, trusted grower relationships and a clear commitment to New Zealand grown kūmara.

"We certainly want to be around for another 50 years," Anthony says.

DIGITAL TOOLS NEED TO DELIVER CLEAR VALUE

Digital technology is already part of the way many growers run their businesses, whether through payroll systems, crop monitoring, moisture sensors, GPS, automation or other tools that generate, store or process data.

A report by AgriTechNZ and Research First has taken a closer look at how digital technology is being used across New Zealand's primary industries. The study was codesigned with Zespri, the Foundation for Arable Research, the Fertiliser Association of New Zealand and DairyNZ, with support from the Ministry for Primary Industries through the Sustainable Food and Fibre Futures initiative.

The research used a large scale survey, in depth interviews and focus groups, engaging more than 1,000 farmers and growers across the sector. Its purpose was simple, to better understand what is helping, and what is holding back, digital adoption.

For growers, the findings are useful because they reflect what many already know from experience. Technology has to solve a real problem. It cannot simply be new or interesting. It needs to make the business easier to run, improve efficiency, support compliance, or help growers make better decisions.

Across the primary sector, the strongest reasons for adopting digital tools were efficiency, ease of use and compliance. The main barriers were cost, uncertainty around return on investment, poor connectivity and the fact that many growers already have manual systems that work.

The horticulture section of the report shows a sector that is relatively positive about technology. Horticulturalists were more likely than others in the primary sector to see value in digital tools, and 56% said they like using digital technology in their business. Growers were also more likely to be confident problem solvers, while 67% believed digital technology currently available added significant value to their operations.

However, there are still hurdles. In horticulture, reluctance to move away from manual systems was a particularly strong barrier, with 60% rating this as significant. Cost, proof of return and connectivity were also important considerations.

Data sharing is another area where trust is critical. The report found that 76% of horticulturalists were happy to share data when it provided direct benefits, and 59% said they already share a range of on farm data with others.

This suggests the opportunity is not about convincing growers to use technology for the sake of it. It is about providing practical tools, clear benefits and trusted support.

For the fresh produce sector, the future of digital adoption will depend on technology that fits into real growing operations, supports good decision making and helps growers remain productive, sustainable and competitive.

STRONGER SYSTEMS, SAFER PEOPLE

By sharing learnings from a recent review, JS Ewers aim to help growers strengthen their own systems and keep people safe.

Based in Nelson, JS Ewers is one of New Zealand's largest glasshouse operations, growing tomatoes, capsicums and eggplant across 13 hectares. Trolleys that run on the heating pipes are an essential tool for their operation, and the wider horticulture sector. They allow teams to prune, harvest and manage crops at height, making them a familiar part of daily work across the country.

The incident

In June 2025, an unstable trolley tipped while an operator was working at height. The operator was hospitalised.

WorkSafe found that the maintenance and inspection regime for the rail system was inadequate, including that rails were not routinely checked before use. Rails were misaligned, trolley components were worn, and pipe rail support spacing did not meet current industry requirements, in that spacing of rail supports was too far apart. Together, these ingredients made the trolley unstable and the fall preventable.

What was learned

Two of the 78 trolleys had missed scheduled servicing, and worn components or uneven rail support spacing went undetected. Both have a major impact on stability and safety. Clear inspection routines, accurate maintenance records and well-trained operators are essential.

The review also highlighted the physical dynamics of the work. Routine actions, such as reaching to detach strings, can shift a trolley's centre of gravity.

Fixing the problem

JS Ewers has since invested significantly in safety improvements. The centrepiece is a newly designed trolley fitted with a digital level, to measure rail alignment. It will be used annually after each crop pullout to ensure rails stay within the required tolerance.

Extra pipe rail supports have been installed across all greenhouses to meet updated manufacturer's specifications. An engineer was also brought in to carry out soil stability testing, as required when rail supports sit on compacted earth.

Key steps to enhance trolley safety

- Undertake detailed reviews of trolley maintenance and rail systems
- Complete updated maintenance and inspection schedules
- Replace any worn components promptly
- Strengthen operating procedures and toolbox training
- Maintain clear and consistent communication between teams and supervisors
- Ensure operators understand the risks of over-reaching

Implement of coloured inspection tags to equipment so operators and supervisors can immediately see when it was last serviced.

Why it matters

Simple actions such as checking, maintaining and communicating help prevent incidents and protect people.

Keeping safety front of mind

We aim to share the improvements made at JS Ewers to help shape best practice across the wider grower network. It is a reminder to all growers to invest time in maintenance, keep procedures up to date and involve teams in regular safety discussions.

Strong systems build strong people and a safer workplace for everyone.

Five Quick Safety Checks for Trolley Systems

1. **Inspect before use**
   Look for loose bolts, worn wheels, damaged rails or signs of corrosion. Report any faults immediately.
2. **Check guardrails and gates**
   Make sure safety gates close properly and rails are firmly secured.
3. **Test emergency stops**
   Confirm that emergency stop buttons work every time. Never assume.
4. **Review maintenance records**
   Keep inspection logs up to date and make sure servicing is completed as scheduled.
5. **Train and remind**
   Ensure every operator knows how to use the equipment safely and understands the importance of reporting issues.

STANDPOINT

PARTNERSHIPS MATTER MORE THAN EVER

In horticulture, we can talk about growing conditions, freight, market dynamics, quality specs, and the technology that keeps everything moving. All of that matters. But when I step back and think about what truly sets our industry apart, it is people.

In a market where conditions can change quickly, no single part of the supply chain can operate in isolation. Growers, sales teams, distribution teams and customers all rely on timely information and trusted relationships to make good decisions.

Across the fresh produce industry, growers are dealing with a wide range of pressures. Severe weather events, global uncertainty, a range of rising costs and shifts in consumer spending are all part of the environment we are operating in.

The impact of global unrest is being felt across every economy, including here in New Zealand. For growers, this can flow through in many ways, particularly through fuel and freight costs, which influence everything from on farm activity and harvest through to packing, transport and distribution. When costs increase across the supply chain, the impact is rarely felt in one place, which makes alignment, planning and execution even more important.

These challenges are not new to our industry, but they do remind us of the importance of working closely together. At the MG Group, we believe the best response to uncertainty is strong planning, clear communication and a shared focus on getting the best possible outcome for growers and customers.

As a grower-owned co-operative, partnership is part of our DNA. It is reflected in our whole organisational approach, Together Stronger. We are here to work alongside growers, not simply as a service provider, but as a dedicated sales, distribution and support arm for their business.

That means our success is directly linked to the success of our grower suppliers. When growers do well, the co-operative is stronger. When the co operative is strong, we are better placed to invest in the people, systems, infrastructure and relationships that support growers into the future.

One of the strengths of MG is the connection we have across the supply chain. From forecasting and procurement through to sales, distribution and customer relationships, each part of the business has an important role to play. When these areas are aligned, produce moves more efficiently from our growers through to the consumer. It also means we can respond more effectively when supply is disrupted, when demand changes or when growers need timely feedback from the market.

Good information, shared early, helps improve decision making. It allows us to plan ahead, respond to changes in supply and demand, and support growers with practical market feedback. It also helps customers plan with confidence, knowing they are backed by MG's national network and strong grower relationships throughout New Zealand.

Our customer partnerships are also an important part of this picture. The ability to reliably supply fresh produce strengthens our position in the market. This gives customers confidence and helps ensure consumers continue to have access to fresh fruit and vegetables throughout the year.

We were recently humbled to receive fresh supplier awards from two customer partners, Foodstuffs South Island and FreshChoice. These awards reflect the effort made by people across the MG Group, from our teams in the markets and branches through to procurement, logistics and support functions. Most importantly, they also reflect the strength of the growers who supply us and the produce we are proud to represent.

While it is always pleasing to receive recognition, awards are not the reason we do what we do. Our focus remains on building trusted relationships, delivering consistently and continuing to improve.

Looking ahead, partnerships will continue to be critical to building long term resilience. We need to keep strengthening communication, sharing market insights and working together on areas such as efficiency, sustainability and future planning.

The fresh produce industry will continue to change, and challenges will always arise. However, by staying connected and focused on shared success, we can continue to navigate those challenges and build a stronger co-operative for the next generation of growers.

®Together.Stronger.

Peter Hendry
CEO

GETTING WEIGHTS & MEASURES RIGHT

Weights and measures may not be the most exciting part of packing produce, but it is one of those areas where getting the basics right really matters. For growers and packers, it helps protect customers, supports fair trading and reduces the risk of issues further along the supply chain.

In New Zealand, packaged goods sold by quantity must meet the requirements of the Weights and Measures Act 1987 and associated Regulations. For fresh produce, this is especially important because many products can lose weight after packing due to moisture loss, with time, temperature and storage conditions all playing a part.

Start with the basics

For anyone packing or selling packaged produce, the key responsibility is to make sure the quantity shown on the pack is accurate. Packaged goods must be sold by net quantity, which means the weight of packaging is excluded from the amount shown on the label.

Labels also need to be clear and use metric units, such as grams or kilograms. Terms such as "approximately" or "when packed" should not be used as a way to manage uncertainty, as they do not provide a defence if product is found to be short quantity.

Practical steps that help

Good systems do not need to be overly complicated, but they do need to be consistent. Useful steps include:

- Using suitable and accurate weighing or measuring equipment
- Checking scales are level, zeroed and working correctly
- Keeping records of quantity checks and corrective actions
- Training staff so they understand net quantity and packing requirements
- Checking product that has been stored for longer than usual
- Allowing for likely moisture loss, particularly for products known to lose weight more quickly

What to do if something goes wrong

If product is found to be under the stated quantity, act quickly. The affected product should be identified and clearly marked so it is not accidentally sold or distributed. The cause should then be investigated, whether it relates to equipment, process or operator behaviour.

Depending on the situation, the product will need to be relabelled with the correct weight, repacked or topped up before it is released.

Getting weights and measures wrong can lead to customer complaints, product being removed from sale, Trading Standards action, infringement fees or fines. More importantly, it can affect trust. Taking a practical, well documented approach helps protect growers, customers and the reputation of the wider fresh produce industry.

mg NEW ZEALAND
CHARITABLE TRUST

MG CHARITABLE TRUST FUNDING ROUND OPENS

The MG Charitable Trust is inviting applications for its next contestable funding round, with anyone considering applying encouraged to start thinking about potential projects now.

The Trust meets in November each year to consider funding applications, with trustees particularly interested in projects that support education and help enhance the profile of the horticulture industry.

Funding applications are welcomed from industry bodies, growing operations, individuals, community groups or anyone in New Zealand with an active interest in supporting the horticulture sector.

Visit the contestable funding page on the MG Group website to find out more, including how to apply and download the application form and supporting FAQs.

Deadline for applications: 13 November 2026
www.mggroup.co.nz/mgtrust