

NEWS FROM MG

GROWER PROFILE

THE FRESH GROWER



## A family led future for The Fresh Grower

Main crops grown



Specialty leafy greens



On the southern edge of Auckland, Pukekohe's volcanic soils have been turning out good vegetables for generations. Since 1956, these soils have been home to the Fong family and their family business. Now, the Fong family enterprise proudly marks 70 years of excellence.

Today, the next chapter is being written by Cameron Fong, who at 28 has stepped into the CEO role at The Fresh Grower, backed by a close knit family and a team that knows how to get things done when the alarm goes off early.

"We are currently farming approximately 500 acres of land," Cameron says. "We grow a wide range of lettuces, spinach, coriander, mainly leafy greens. Variety wise, it's 20 plus."

That range is not a happy accident. The Fresh Grower has built its name on taking



↑ Cameron Fong and Erin Mai with MG Representatives Neil Bridgens, Alex Ye and Willie Little

niche lines and turning them into everyday favourites. Baby cos lettuce, fancy lettuce and baby spinach have become go to choices for shoppers who want something fresh, quick and interesting, without needing to be a chef.

The business is a well known part of the Pukekohe story. The Fong's are recognised locally as a three generation farming family, with deep knowledge of both their growing practices and their market. In recent years, that focus has expanded into a more deliberate brand and product strategy, pairing new varieties with clear messaging about how to use them at home.

That brand strength is a real asset. In produce, quality matters, but being recognisable on shelf gives a business a head start with

consumers and a stronger platform for innovation. Cameron credits his uncle, Allan Fong with much of that thinking.

"We're fortunate that our brand is fairly well known, and I believe customers recognise it" he says. "All our bags are colour coded as well and it's quite bright looking. We try to make it stand out."

It is not just what the product is, but how it is explained. The Fresh Grower has leaned into education through food shows, in store tastings, and practical ideas that help customers feel confident trying something new.

"Promoting and explaining to customers what it is and what it tastes like is an important part of what we do," Cameron says. "Along with sharing cooking tips and ways to use it."

A good example is Crunchita, a lettuce type with a clear point of difference. Alongside it sits other key lines that has helped The Fresh Grower develop a point of difference in the market.

"Baby cos, we were one of the first to grow it in New Zealand," Cameron says. "and baby cos remains one of our strongest lines."



↑ Cameron Fong and Willie Little

Behind the brand and the range of crops sits a sizeable operation. The Fresh Grower employs around 100 staff and much of the work is hands on. With different varieties planted for different times of the year, the planning and harvesting programme needs tight coordination.

Cameron's leadership style has been shaped by working on the tools and learning the job from the ground up.

"I basically started from the bottom," he says. "Then I just worked up through the business."

After completing a Bachelor of Business and Management, he returned to the farm full time, stepping through harvest, packhouse, dispatch and team leadership before taking on sales, planning and harvest management.

Succession is often talked about in horticulture as a challenge. Here, it is a strength, because it is shared. Cameron's older brother Daniel leads the growing side and his twin brother Matthew works as inventory manager in the packhouse. His cousin Ryan is involved in tractor work and compliance and Ryan's wife Erin is the CFO. His father, Colin, and uncle, Allan remain close, providing experience and perspective, while another cousin Jessica supports the business with health and safety and marketing.

"We're quite a tight family," Cameron says. "We all grew up together on the farm."

That closeness shows up most when the pressure is on. "It does get stressful at times and tough, but we pull through," he says. "We all help each other out and work together as a family."

The Fresh Grower's relationship with the MG Group plays a practical role in getting that produce into homes.

"We talk almost every day," Cameron says. "On sales and what we've got in store, and what we've got in the field."

He says that regular communication helps them keep moving volume, with the MG Group team selling The Fresh Grower range through the market each day and supporting strong supply to customers.

Cameron has stepped into the CEO role with a clear understanding of what the business needs, and with strong support around him. There is a quiet confidence in how he describes the next phase. The foundations are strong, the family is close, and the drive for innovation has not slowed down.

"We want to keep building the business, continue on the family legacy," he says.





# Efficiency at the centre of cherry growing

Above Lake Dunstan, with views stretching across the Pisa Mountain range and the Dunstan Mountains, Fortune Fruit has carved out a reputation as one of Central Otago's most efficient and quietly successful cherry operations.

The orchard was established in the late 1990s by grower Hugh Dendy, who brought years of cherry growing experience with him when he moved to New Zealand from Canada. What began as a bare block has developed into a mature and well organised orchard supported by a new generation of plantings at Clyde and a team that values precision and hard work.

Part of Hugh's early vision when he purchased the Sugarloaf property was to operate in both hemispheres, giving the business the ability to manage two cherry harvests each year.

While he now exclusively focuses on his New Zealand operation, it was that thinking that set the foundations for what Fortune Fruit has become today.

The Lowburn site covers 42 hectares, almost all of which is mature production with a further 25 hectares of young trees at Clyde. Across the two properties, Fortune Fruit grows nine cherry varieties throughout the season, beginning in mid December with early maturing varieties Santina and Sonnet, finishing in early February with Staccato.



Although the orchard grows a small volume of apricots, the business is almost entirely focused on cherries. This supports its reputation for efficiency, something General Manager Blair Davidson sees as central to their success.

"Cost drives a lot of our thinking," says Blair. "The cost of running a place like this has increased over the last decade, especially since Covid. So, we have to be smarter about how we do things. We need to do more with fewer people, and we need to hold on to good staff."

That focus on efficiency shapes the orchard as much as it shapes the packhouse. One of the practices that sets Fortune Fruit apart is strip picking, a method Hugh brought with him from Canada. Rather than selective picking, the team picks everything on the tree once it is ready, then lets the packhouse Fachaux cherry cluster separator and RedPearl grader do the sorting.

"No one did strip picking in New Zealand at the time," Blair says. "It was just what Hugh had always done. It is becoming more common now, especially with labour shortages during Covid. It allows good volumes to come off the trees quickly, and the grading technology handles the detailed sorting."

The approach works because the orchard is pruned heavily to allow light into the canopy, lifting fruit size and firmness. The consistency of the growing and pruning systems makes strip picking a viable part of the overall operation rather than a shortcut, and the packhouse technology has also played an important role in supporting the practice.

Fortune Fruit has invested in a Red Pearl Optical Grader that scans each cherry and sorts for size and quality with a level of precision that manual sorting simply could not achieve. The combination of pruning, an efficient team of pickers and accurate grading makes the system more streamlined and

allows them to focus on managing crop flow rather than labour bottlenecks.

While efficiency is a defining feature, Fortune Fruit is equally known for the quality of its team and work environment. The team is known for being friendly and tight knit, reflecting the family nature of the orchard.

"We want to see people move forward in life," he says. "We are not interested in holding anyone back. We want them to develop, get skills and do well, whether they stay with us or go somewhere else. It is better for the individual and it is better for the industry."

The partnership with MG is an important part of Fortune Fruit's business model. MG handles the domestic cherries, providing reliable placement into key markets throughout New Zealand. Fortune Fruit also works with MG subsidiary business, Te Mata Exports as an export partner.

"MG plays a vital role in selling the domestic cherries," Blair says. "It can be easy to overlook how important the domestic market is, but it is a significant part of our operation. The team at MG have always done a very good job for us and we value that partnership."

Looking ahead, Blair takes a pragmatic view. The orchard will continue to grow, adapt to seasonal challenges and look for opportunities to refine the system further. Climate variability brings uncertainty, but he sees the answer in continual improvement rather than dramatic shifts in direction.

"Every season is different," he says. "You do everything you can to prepare, but the weather will do what it does. If you hold on to that too much, your health would suffer. So we keep moving forward and we focus on doing everything we can to grow better cherries each year, and hope that the weather plays its part in achieving this."

↔ General Manager Blair Davidson and MG Representative Ross Howard  
↑ Fortune Fruit employees

## Main crops grown



Cherries



# FOOD SAFETY STARTS ON THE PACKAGING

Food safety is something we all care about, but it can be easy to assume the consumer knows what to do once produce leaves the farm gate. The reality is that clear, simple messaging on packaging can make a difference. It helps shoppers handle product correctly, builds trust in the brand, can reduce avoidable waste, reduces the likelihood of complaints escalating, and can lower the risk of a product recall by encouraging correct handling at home.

For a lot of products, the bag is a direct line of communication between the grower and the consumer. A short instruction such as wash before use or cook before use can give consumers confidence and remove doubt.



## Why washing messages matter

In our industry, product, particularly green vegetables, are grown in natural environments where soil and naturally occurring bacteria can be present. Even with good on farm practices, produce can still pick up small amounts of dirt or residue during harvest and handling.

Clear washing instructions prompt consumers to rinse product properly and reduce the risk of foodborne illness. That protects the consumer, and it also protects the grower's reputation.

The wording does not need to be complicated. What matters is that it is clear and easy to spot. If the product is not intended to be eaten without washing, say so plainly.



## When cooking is the safer option

Some products are more commonly cooked, and for certain greens grown in open environments, a cooking instruction can add an extra layer of protection. Heat provides a final safety step by reducing surface bacteria. A simple line such as cook until wilted and steaming hot gives the consumer a clear end point.



## Simple phrases that work

Consider including one of the following, depending on your product and process:

- Pre washed and ready to eat
- Wash before use
- Cook before use

## A quick checklist

- Keep messages short and consistent
- Make instructions easy to find, with good contrast and clear font size
- Match the message to the product and the way it is typically eaten
- Avoid vague language that leaves room for interpretation



Clear food messaging is practical, it is proactive, and it is one more way we can strengthen trust in New Zealand grown produce.

## Modern Day Slavery

# MODERN SLAVERY REPORTING IS GETTING CLOSER



A Modern Slavery Bill, co-sponsored by National and Labour, is due to be introduced to Parliament in February. With cross party support, it has moved ahead faster than most member's bills.

Modern slavery is an umbrella term for situations where people are exploited through coercion, threats or deception, including trafficking and forced labour.

If the Bill becomes law, organisations with consolidated revenue of \$100 million or more would be expected to publish an annual modern slavery statement. The statement would outline their operations and supply chains, any risks or incidents they have identified, and what they are doing to prevent and address them. A public register is also proposed.

The draft Bill includes penalties for failing to report or for knowingly providing false information. These settings may change as the Bill moves through the select committee process.

What does this mean for growers? Most growing businesses are unlikely to sit above the proposed revenue threshold. Even so, because the focus is on supply chains, growers may be required to provide information about labour practices, contractors, and how concerns are raised and handled. While it's early days, you might also notice more attention on documenting your approach.

One area that may come into sharper focus over time is the use of labour hire contractors. If reporting requirements do progress, it is possible that larger organisations will want more confidence about how labour is being provided throughout their supply chains, including through third parties. What that looks like in practice will depend on how the Bill develops.

The good news is that many growers already have strong foundations. Knowing who is supplying your labour, keeping clear records, and making sure workers understand their rights and how to speak up are sensible steps that support both people and the reputation of our industry.

The Bill still has a way to go, and there will be opportunities for input. MG will keep across developments and share updates as the details become clearer over the coming months.

## GROWING A HEALTHIER NEW ZEALAND TOGETHER

MG Group is pleased to announce it has become a Platinum Partner of The Gut Foundation, supporting a shared focus on healthier communities. Fresh fruit and vegetables sit at the heart of good gut health, and our growers work every day to ensure Kiwis can access great produce. The Gut Foundation backs that up with research, education and advocacy that helps people understand why diet matters for long term wellbeing.

Through this partnership we will support the Foundation's wider work, with a particular focus on developing practical nutrition and gut health resources for primary and secondary schools. By helping young people build healthy habits early, we can play a part in positive change that lasts for generations.



STANDPOINT



# OUR PEOPLE, OUR DIFFERENCE

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.

Across the MG Group, we often say that people are our greatest asset, and for good reason. Fresh produce is a high pace, high pressure industry where timing, care, and good judgement make the difference. When the phone starts ringing early, or a plan changes quickly, it is people who keep everything moving. It is also people who build trust with growers and customers, and who strengthen confidence in what we do and how we do it.

We are fortunate at MG to have a stable workforce, with many long serving team members who bring a huge amount of knowledge. That experience is not just operational. It is the kind of insight that helps solve problems before they grow, and the relationships that keep communication flowing when it matters most. We are proud of that stability because it creates continuity for growers and customers, and it helps us

stay focused on consistent execution, even when conditions are challenging.

Alongside that, we have a steady pipeline of good young people coming into the business, including through our Graduate Programme. Having experienced people who lead by example, and newer team members who bring energy and fresh thinking, strengthens the whole organisation.

A strong team does not happen by accident. It comes from having clear expectations, investing in capability, and creating an environment where people feel respected and supported. That is just as relevant on farms and in retail stores as it is in market operations.

For a lot of industries, holding on to good staff has been challenging in recent years, with labour availability shifting and fluctuating across the country. While wages matter, we also know that culture and work

environment play a major role in whether someone stays.

We are also fortunate to work in an industry with real purpose. Horticulture helps feed people every day, supports regional communities, and contributes to New Zealand's economy. When people feel safe at work, valued, and connected to that bigger picture, they are more likely to stay and take pride in what they do.

There are a few practical reminders worth keeping in mind. First, set the tone. The standard you walk past is the standard you accept. When managers are consistent, fair, and clear, it gives everyone confidence in what good looks like. Second, communicate. People who understand the plan, the priorities for the day, and the why behind decisions are more likely to engage and take pride in the outcome. Third, make health and safety personal. It is easy to see health and safety as compliance, paperwork, or another box to tick. It is a powerful way to show your team that they matter. Finally, recognise effort. It does not need to be complicated. Small gestures and genuine thanks go a long way, especially in the busiest parts of the season.

On the topic of recognising people, I would like to acknowledge the retirement of Phillipa Dunn, who started with MG in 1981. Phillipa has been part of the fabric of this business for more than four decades. Her contribution reflects the kind of loyalty and professionalism that has helped shape MG into what it is today. While a separate article on this page shares more of her story, I want to add my thanks and wish her all the very best.

Thank you to everyone for the role you play in backing our teams, and in supporting a sector that relies on good people every day.

**® Together.Stronger.**



Peter Hendry  
CEO



CHARITABLE TRUST

## EDUCATION FUND

The MG Trust will again offer significant subsidies through the Education Fund.

Applications for these programmes close on 13 March 2026.

Eighty percent support will be available for the following programmes:

- 2026 Rabobank Farm Managers Programme
- 2026 to 2027 Rabobank Executive Development Programme
- 2026 Mayfield Group Governance Development Programmes
- 2026 Kellogg Rural Leaders Programme

More information can be found on the MG Group website:

[www.mgroup.co.nz/mgtrust](http://www.mgroup.co.nz/mgtrust)



# A REMARKABLE CAREER AT MG

Phillipa Dunn has never been one to seek the spotlight. For more than four decades, she has quietly kept things moving, delivering a remarkable amount of work with calm consistency and very little fuss.

Phillipa joined Market Gardeners Limited, the MG Group, in 1981 and will retire in May this year. Across that time, she has built a reputation as a steady hand and a trusted source of knowledge. While she will be missed, one of Phillipa's greatest strengths has been her willingness to share what she knows. For many years she has been the person other administrative team members,

and MG people more generally, have turned to when they need clarity, context, or the right answer quickly. Her understanding of the business runs deep, and her support has helped strengthen the administration function across the country.

In many ways, Phillipa's story has always been closely linked to MG. She grew up around the markets, with her father, Noel Dunn, holding senior roles within the business from 1959 to 1985. It was Noel who persuaded Phillipa to take on a temporary job with MG in 1977. At the time it was meant to be a short stopgap before university. Instead, it became the start of a career that has spanned more than 40 years.

After completing her seventh form year at St Oran's College in Lower Hutt, Phillipa began studying history and international politics at Victoria University, continuing her work with MG on a part time basis. An eighteen month overseas adventure followed, including overland travel from Kathmandu to London. When she returned to New Zealand

in late 1981, an opportunity opened in the Wellington branch office and Phillipa stepped into the role, beginning what would become a permanent position from 1982.

Over the years, she has seen enormous change. From the arrival of early computers that created more problems than they solved, to the excitement of new product lines that are now everyday staples, Phillipa has adapted with perseverance and an open mind. As national branch administrator, she has remained closely connected to what is happening across MG's branch network, bringing a valuable combination of practical insight, institutional knowledge, and genuine commitment to the team around her.

As Phillipa prepares for retirement, her legacy is clear in the people she has supported, the systems she has strengthened, and the countless tasks completed with care and reliability. MG has been fortunate to have her, and we wish her all the very best for the next chapter.