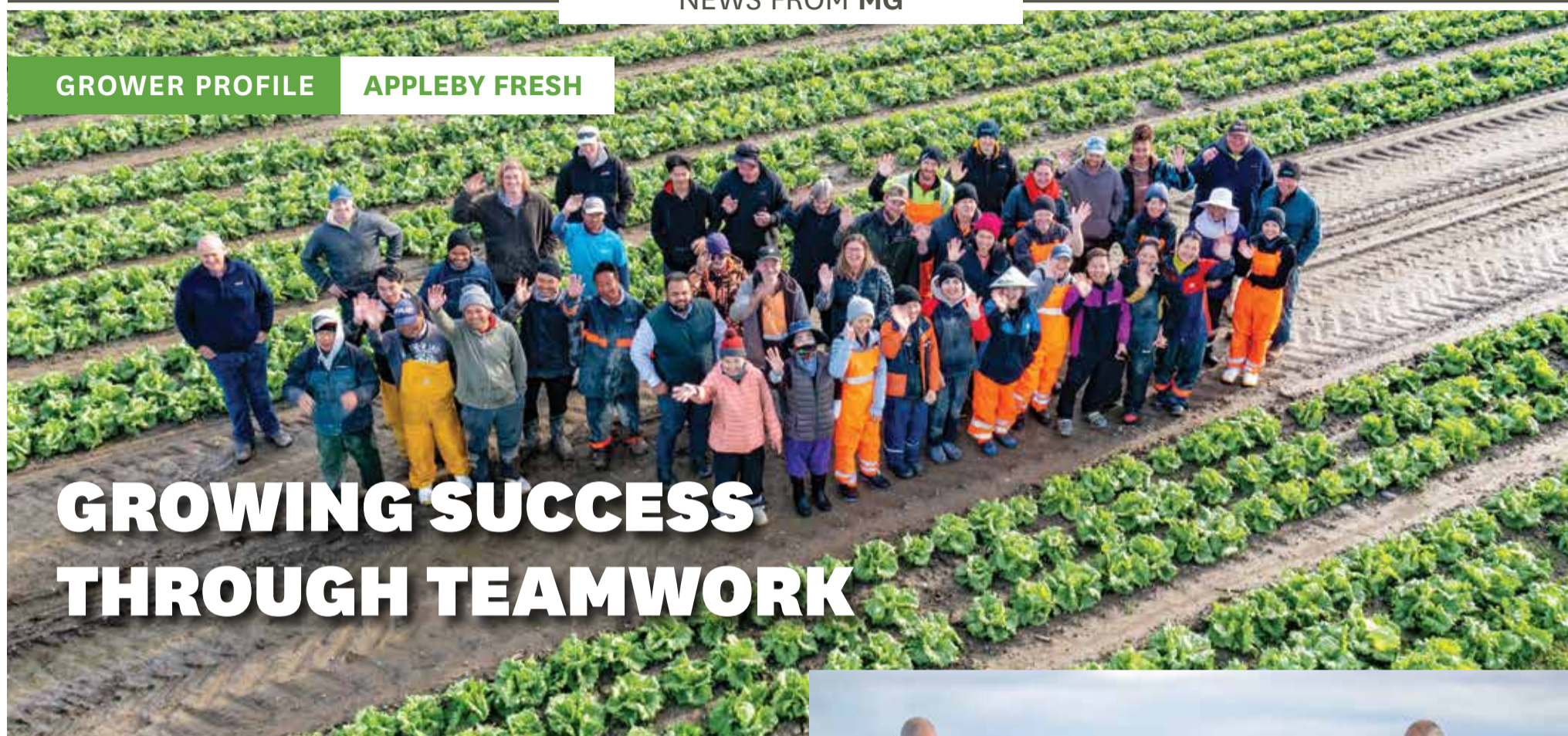


NEWS FROM MG

GROWER PROFILE

APPLEBY FRESH



## GROWING SUCCESS THROUGH TEAMWORK

Located on the Waimea Plains, a short drive from Nelson, a family-run growing operation where third-generation growers Mark O'Connor and his brothers, Brendon and Michael, have been working together to grow green vegetables under the trading name of Appleby Fresh for over 26 years.

With the brothers now passing the torch to the next generation, Mark's sons, Oliver and Joseph, have stepped into management roles, overseeing the 180-hectare property and its production of 36 different vegetables.

Family is at the centre of Appleby Fresh. While Mark and Michael are no longer leading the management side of things, they're still present in the business and, along with their other brother Brendon, sit on the board in a governance capacity. Mark also spends time giving back to the industry, including serving as a board member of Market Gardeners Limited (MG Group).

"You can't have two bosses," says Mark. "You've got to step back and let the next generation come through. Like us, they're not always going to get it right, and our role is to be around to help guide them."

"Farming, and what we have here today, is a result of the people before us, and we're pleased to be able to manage succession to bring through the next generation. It will keep improving, and an important part of that is having new thinking, along with really good employees."

Even though they've developed into a large growing business, they've retained the family feel that resonates through their team of 56 permanent staff.

"We're only as good as the people we have working in our team," says Mark. "We keep looking to do things better, and people are a big part of that."



↑ Jade Reeves & Greig Pullar from the MG Group along with Oliver and Mark O'Connor

"We brought on a production agronomist who has been excellent for taking practices to a new level, and we have a lot of other good people in key spots."

A strength of the business is the number of long-standing and loyal team members. This is a testament to the inclusive culture and family feel of the business.

"Don't always focus on money first," says Mark. "If you focus on the people first, the other stuff, like money, takes care of itself."

"We like to make sure everyone feels included." A small example is the way we give health and safety updates—we put them out in four languages. Everyone really appreciates that sort of thing."

"Having happy teams is about being fair, respectful, and making them feel comfortable in the environment."

It takes an outsider to recognise that Mark's description of the work they do to drive a positive culture is modest. It's clear the O'Connors put time and effort into getting to know their people, supporting individuals, valuing different cultures, and showing generosity towards the communities where

their teams live. It's not one thing, but a culmination of a lot of small gestures and doing the basics well, including making sure everyone is informed and feels part of the business's success.

"We're also big on communication, and our key staff are in touch with each other all the time. This is supported by technology, with the Chat-Line platform used to keep everyone informed" says Mark.

"Typically, the production agronomist will flow information through to the eight groups working directly with her, giving instructions and timings for the day."

"For example, the tractor driver might have to finish ground preparation on a block. An alert is sent, which triggers the pre-emergent sprayer, which signals to the planters to come in. When they're finished, the irrigation team is told to come in."

Two-way communication is also important with the team at MG Group, with shared information and market feedback between the MG procurement team, branch network, and team at Appleby Fresh supporting good decision-making that benefits both parties.



Waimea Plains

Main crops grown



Green vegetables

↓ Jade Reeves from the MG Group and Joseph O'Connor





# A NEW ERA UNDER MG GROUP OWNERSHIP



Warkworth

Main crops grown



Capsicums

Situated in Warkworth, 60 minutes north of Auckland, SPL is a leading New Zealand growing operation recognised for its high-quality glasshouse-grown capsicums. Led by Blair Morris and supported by a capable leadership team and experienced staff, SPL's success is built on modern infrastructure, sustainable growing practices, and a dedicated team of glasshouse specialists.



SPL is not only New Zealand's largest single-site glasshouse operation, covering 26 hectares, but also a major employer in the Warkworth region. With 130 permanent staff and 68 RSE workers from Kiribati and Tuvalu, SPL plays a crucial role in the local economy. The passionate team and supportive work environment are key to SPL's continued success.

Approaching two years since the MG Group took full ownership of SPL, the partnership has undergone a successful transition. The integration with the MG Group has not only been seamless but has also seen SPL go from strength to strength, with good levels of production and both organisations benefiting from each other's industry expertise and shared resources.

The MG Group's investment in growing operations falls under its "securing supply" pillar of the co-operative's overarching business strategy. The volume of fresh produce generated on farms owned by the MG

Group creates cornerstone supply, enhancing relevance with all customer groups for the benefit of all growers supplying through the MG Group.

This is highlighted by the fact that the MG Group, in partnership with existing glasshouse suppliers, has increased its North Island business, while SPL's production volumes have remained relatively consistent. Not only has this supported the MG Group's strategy to secure supply and grow the category, but it has also delivered benefits for all shareholders, with additional growth and equity created in the co-operative.



One key change in the past few months has been the refreshed SPL brand, including the introduction of a new website. This better reflects the modern operation SPL is today and positions it well for the future, including a brand that will resonate with consumers through packaging and other marketing initiatives.



The focus of SPL and the MG Group is on being a successful growing operation and investing in areas that enhance capsicum production. This investment allows for options to expand in the future as the market allows. This approach ensures the MG Group remains adaptable and responsive to new opportunities, supporting its underlying co-operative goal of ensuring long-term success for current and future shareholders.

The MG Group and SPL partnership journey to date has been marked by successful integration, strong production, and a strong shared long-term strategy. The combination of tradition, innovation, experience, and a dedicated workforce positions them well for ongoing future success.

[www.spl.co.nz](http://www.spl.co.nz)

← General Operations Manager Stuart Attwood and General Manager Blair Morris



# UNITED FRESH PRODUCE TRENDS

## Fresh Produce Trends to Watch in 2025

As we enter 2025, fresh produce is more accessible than it has been for several seasons. United Fresh, the pan-produce industry organisation representing Aotearoa's fresh fruit and vegetable sector, has identified key trends shaping the year ahead.



### The Rise of "Food as Medicine"

The concept of using food for health is gaining traction among Millennials and Gen Z. Cognitive-boosting foods, immunity-supporting fruits, and gut-health superstars like apples, citrus, avocados, and berries are becoming dietary staples. This focus on wellness signals growth opportunities for the fresh produce sector.

### Compostable Packaging Takes Centre Stage

With single-use plastics largely phased out, compostable and recyclable packaging innovations are taking over. Edible wraps, compostable trays, and minimal packaging designs support eco-conscious habits while maintaining food quality. Expect to see even more progress in sustainable packaging this year.

### The Home-Grown and Home-Made Revolution

Rising living costs have pushed households to embrace home cooking over dining out. Consumers are gravitating towards locally produced products, with increasing interest in sustainable farming practices. This shift reflects a commitment to sustainability and simplicity.

### Cucumber Craze Sweeps Social Media

TikTok has propelled cucumbers into the spotlight, thanks to influencers, who have showcased creative recipes to millions of followers. From pairing cucumbers with smoked salmon to filling them with egg salad, the trend is expected to peak during New Zealand's cucumber season.

### Healthier Lifestyles, Healthier Choices

Holistic wellness is reshaping consumer habits, driving a shift away from processed foods, sugar, and alcohol. Anti-inflammatory diets, which rely heavily on fresh produce, are becoming mainstream as Kiwis prioritise balanced lifestyles that enhance both physical and mental health.

For growers and retailers, these trends present opportunities to align the demands of health-conscious, sustainability-focused consumers. Whether through innovative packaging, locally grown produce, or social media inspiration, 2025 promises to be another interesting year for the fresh produce industry.

## STRENGTHENING TRUST IN HORTICULTURE: The Importance of Social Practice Certification

Good social practice is a priority for consumers. Therefore, naturally that focus extends to customers and the wider horticulture industry, as trust and having high ethical standards are linked to business success. Social practice certification is a way for growers to demonstrate their commitment to meeting legal employer obligations and demonstrating good worker welfare.



Unfortunately, New Zealand is not immune to issues of worker exploitation. In recent years a small number of businesses in the horticulture industry have fallen short with regard to the way they treat their people, some of which have made headlines. These incidents can damage the reputation of the sector and highlight the importance of having robust systems in place to ensure fair treatment of workers. Social practice certifications provide a framework to help growers meet these expectations while signalling their commitment to ethical standards to both domestic and international markets.

Social practice certifications cover a broad range of areas, including working conditions, forced labour, fair labour practices, and health and safety. They demonstrate that growers comply with legal requirements around employment, wages, worker welfare, and immigration.

Retailers now view social responsibility assurance as essential, in much the same way that food safety certification has been a requirement over the past two decades. For growers supplying large retailers through the MG Group, obtaining a social practice certification is mandatory.

Growers will be familiar with the NZGAP Social Practice Add-on, which complements NZGAP's core food safety certification and is available to businesses certified under NZGAP, NZGAP GLOBALG.A.P. Equivalent, or GLOBALG.A.P. It allows growers to demonstrate compliance through the audit process and is published on the NZGAP Public Register website

Alternatively, growers can pursue other recognised certifications, such as SEDEX/SMETA. These programmes similarly focus on ethical and responsible labour practices, giving growers the flexibility to choose the certification that best suits their business needs while meeting market expectations.

## CHOOSING THE RIGHT LABOUR CONTRACTORS

### Protecting Your Business and Workers

If you're using third-party labour providers, it's important to carry out due diligence to ensure workers are treated fairly and employment standards are being upheld.

Ensuring that people working on your growing operation are not being exploited is not only the right thing to do from a moral standpoint, but also essential for your business. If a contractor mistreats workers, it can damage your reputation, affect staff retention, and even result in lost business with markets and retailers.

#### Practical steps:

- Work with certified contractors (e.g., NZGAP or NZ Ethical Employers)
- Review employment contracts
- Take photos of contractor employees on-site
- Request and review payslips
- Engage directly with contractor employees
- Observe working conditions and interactions

Due diligence doesn't stop after the initial checks. Keep monitoring your contractors throughout the contract period to maintain confidence and uphold employment standards.







# LOOKING AHEAD AT 2025

## I hope you have had a good start to the year!

Last year was another busy one for the MG Group. The fresh produce industry faced significant challenges, some of which remain as we step into 2025. Ongoing cost pressures, variable consumer demand, and high volumes of product in the market continue to test our industry. These challenges are not new - the fresh produce sector has experienced similar conditions many times before. History has shown that resilience, adaptability, and strong partnerships are key to overcoming them.

MG Group's strategy remains focused on fostering a sustainable and resilient future for our growers and customers. As a co-operative, our success is built on strong relationships, and in times like these, collaboration is key. While the challenges are real, our ability to plan, communicate, and draw on our collective experience will determine how well we navigate them. This year, we remain committed to this approach, ensuring we continue to be the best option for efficiently and effectively getting our grower-suppliers' fruit and vegetables to market while maintaining quality and continuity for our customers.

Another important aspect of our strategy is leveraging innovation and technology. The pace of change in this area is rapid, and we are committed to staying ahead of the curve. Whether through data-driven insights, improving supply chain efficiency, or modernising infrastructure, we are focused on investing in resources and technology that enhance productivity and future-proof the co-operative.

We are dedicated to fostering open communication to ensure the voices of all our key stakeholders are heard, especially our

grower-suppliers. In addition to regular interaction with our teams across the country, this year we will continue to provide opportunities to share insights and feedback while connecting with others in the industry through reviews, regional grower meetings, and our grower education programme, Growing You.

Collaboration remains one of our greatest strengths, and we have consistently engaged with growers to discuss business information. This year, a particular focus is on taking those conversations further - working alongside growers to develop strategies that support their success.

As we move through 2025, we also know that challenges will arise. But, as we have done in the past, by working together we can navigate them and continue to progress positively.

Finally, I want to thank each of you for your continued support of the MG Group and the wider horticulture industry. Your hard work and passion are the driving forces behind our business and success. As we enter another year, I am optimistic about what we can achieve together.



® Together.Stronger.

Peter Hendry  
CEO



I'd like to take this opportunity to acknowledge long serving team member, Roger Georgieff, who passed away on 15 December 2025. He was a well-known personality, and it is clear that his dedication left an indelible mark on the industry.

Over his remarkable 27-year career with the MG Group, Roger's knowledge and leadership played a pivotal role in building our procurement team from the ground up and driving our domestic business forward. His loyalty to the MG Group and the wider industry was unmatched, and his contributions were invaluable. Roger was not only a respected colleague but also a friend to many, and his passing is deeply felt.

It was moving to see so many of our growers attend his funeral, both in person and online—a testament to the lasting impact he had. Our thoughts remain with everyone connected to Roger, particularly his family. He will be greatly missed.



## Grower Education Fund

### Unlock Growth Opportunities with the MG Trust Grower Education Fund

The MG Charitable Trust (MG Trust) is committed to empowering growers and their employees by supporting access to educational programmes that enhance skills and knowledge. In 2025, the MG Trust is offering significant subsidies to help growers attend three leading courses designed to develop leadership, management, and governance capabilities.

#### 2025 Rabobank Farm Managers Programme

This programme is a valuable opportunity to learn from industry experts and network with top growers and farmers. Participants will further develop essential management and leadership skills, improve communication and time management, create business plans, and strengthen financial management and budgeting expertise.

- Subsidy Value: \$6,000 (covers at least 80% of the course fees)
- Eligibility: Minimum of three years' on-farm experience

#### 2025-2026 Rabobank Executive Development Programme

Designed to build strategic planning capabilities and commercial management skills, this programme empowers growers to explore options for business growth. Participants gain inspiration from farming and business experts and connect with a network of progressive farmers.

- Subsidy Value: \$14,000 (covers at least 80% of the course fees)
- Eligibility: Minimum of five years' senior experience and status as a key decision maker

#### 2025 Mayfield Group Governance Development Programmes

This six-month programme equips participants with the tools to become confident, curious, and capable leaders in governance. It covers board purpose and director roles, governance of strategy, risk, finance, and legal matters, and addresses current and future board priorities. Participants benefit from workshops, 1:1 coaching, and online tutorials featuring real-life governance case studies.

- Subsidy Value: \$7,800 (covers at least 80% of the course fees)
- Eligibility: Open to aspiring, new, or experienced directors, and those who report or interact with a Board

#### How to Apply

Growers interested in these opportunities can find further details and application information on the MG Charitable Trust webpage.

The deadline for applications is 13 March 2025.

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