



Peninsula Fresh Organics owners Wayne and Natasha Shields.

Growing a sustainable model

BEGINNING WITH THREE ACRES IN 2009, PENINSULA FRESH ORGANICS HAS GROWN OVER THE YEARS TO COMPRISE 40 ACRES IN BAXTER, VICTORIA ON THE MORNINGTON PENINSULA AND 100 ACRES IN BARHAM, NEW SOUTH WALES NEAR THE MURRAY RIVER. WAYNE SHIELDS IS A FIFTH GENERATION MARKET GARDENER, CERTIFIED ORGANIC VEGETABLE GROWER AND INNOVATOR. HE SHARES WITH *VEGETABLES AUSTRALIA* THE SECRETS TO HIS SUCCESS.

Fifteen years ago, Wayne Shields was a conventional farmer. In recent years, however, he has found his niche as an organic grower offering year-round supplies of lettuce, leek, kale, cabbage and heirloom varieties. After expanding his business, Peninsula Fresh Organics, to a second farm in Barham, New South Wales on the Murray River, he has been able to extend these lines.

“I’ve found a lot of opportunities in the organic sector and there has been room for us to grow. With the expansion up into Barham, we are moving into the

bigger volumes of produce like the butternut pumpkin,” Wayne says.

The foundation for the company’s growth has been an ecosystem approach to farming. This approach is seen not just in the sustainable practices that are implemented, but also in the company’s employment, development programs and community involvement.

“I have seen that when you are not damaging the environment, the environment helps you get through things. When other farmers near me are having an issue with a certain pest, I have my own

ecosystem helping me out.”

Wayne perfects one business aspect before moving on to the next. His plans include installing solar power and drip irrigation practices for increased sustainability. Currently, his focus is on developing sustainable biofertilisers through the ReGenAg Program.

“There’s a whole biofertiliser movement. There are courses – of which I am hosting a few – and you take the processes that apply to your business. I am getting the biology in the soil kick-started by learning about brewing my own biofertilisers and composts. I got a really

good result out of that – and it is only early days yet.”

Community stewardship benefiting all soil

After completing the soil development course, Wayne noticed improvements to both his produce and his bottom line, and is now helping others to benefit from it.

“I thought it was fantastic and I got good, quick results – especially in the sandy soil of Barham – and cheap results too. Once you know the recipe, you do it yourself and it cost so





much less. For those looking to limit their inputs, there is some really good information out there.”

Peninsula Fresh Organics has hosted growers from across the country. The most recent course attracted growers from Western Australia, Queensland and Victoria, contributing to the development of a network for open communication among growers.

Peninsula Fresh Organics Land Management and Quality team member Lisa Brassington believes the ReGenAg Program has made a huge difference to Wayne’s produce production as well as many others.

“ReGenAg is the theory of regenerating the soil on top. It’s a smart way of doing an in-house green waste system. It teaches the biochemistry side to soil and has been a great way for growers to get a profile for different areas of soil performance in a single paddock and to understand what results you can achieve with crop rotations,” Lisa says.

“The upside for the

community is that farmers have a network, a ‘biofertiliser phone-a-friend’ from all over Australia that they can use.”

Lisa explains that the proof for the program is in their produce and the interest it has generated at the farm gate. The local Landcare network even organised an organic grower’s group from across Western Port Victoria to visit the farm and see the effects of the program.

“This year’s produce is saying, ‘Thanks for feeding me – I’ve come on big and strong.’ The growers will be able to see the effects of applying the methods of EnviroVeg and ReGenAg for themselves.”

Communicating strength

Effective communication is essential across the whole business operation at Peninsula Fresh Organics, but is of particular importance for the multicultural staff. With a component of Vietnamese speaking workers on-farm, Wayne had been searching for ways to communicate



Photography by Luka Kauzlaric.

complex operating instructions to these team members, who include farm managers. The recently released Vietnamese EnviroVeg Manual has been very useful in helping the workers to understand more complex instructions and farm management techniques.

Lisa appreciates the Vietnamese farmers’ connection with farming the land and the importance of conceptualising EnviroVeg Best Environmental Management Practice theories with on-farm operations.

“In Vietnam they are very good at intensive horticultural farming; the farmers have natural land management skills but not always the technical horticultural understanding. The Vietnamese EnviroVeg Manual gives these growers the opportunity to understand the theory of horticulture, not just the practice,” she says.

“It might answer farming questions that they don’t know how to ask.”

She believes the next level would be for the industry to have access to a common

smartphone translation tool for all areas of agribusiness.

“It would be great to have a multi-lingual/multi-crop app developed for farmers. Everyone has a smartphone in their pocket and it would also be especially great for communicating with international buyers.”

Looking ahead

Wayne recognises that supporting sustainable growers is important for the future of the industry.

“I think down the track there will be a bit of a meeting between organic and conventional. EnviroVeg is a good starting point – it takes people to a place they probably didn’t think they could get to, with just a few simple changes to their practices.”



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Peninsula Fresh Organics Land Management and Quality team member Lisa Brassington with Vietnamese growers.