



Dutchman's destiny

Gisborne-based grower Wim Zwart has taken the helm at HortNZ's Fresh Tomato Product Group, where his quiet confidence and grasp of industry issues means it is in safe hands

Wim Zwart was probably always destined to become a grower.

The new chairman of Horticulture New Zealand's Fresh Tomato Product Group has family pedigree in the growing business and says it is all he has ever done. "I have been growing since I left school. My father was a grower, my grandfather was a grower, so I just grew up with it."

His forebears grew lettuces, carrots, roses, radishes and whitloof - a type of chicory - in Holland. He immigrated to New Zealand when he was 20 and worked for his uncle, Bart Zwart, growing roses, tomatoes and cucumbers at Ormond, just north of Gisborne.

He now has been on the job for close to half a century and is one of the country's smaller but more experienced tomato growers.

Wim grows tomatoes under 2000sq m of glasshouse on the outskirts of Gisborne and fresh cut roses under 1600sq m, adding diversity to his business.

Being a small grower and also having the disadvantage of distance in terms of freight cost, the Zwarts have had to work hard to stay in the industry. They have cut back on staff and run a tight operation. Wife Maree helps, and one full time and five part-time staff are employed.

Primarily the Zwarts pick, grade and pack their tomatoes for Beekist, a brand owned by Status Produce which is owned by Turners and Growers. They send their tomatoes all over the North Island.

Their produce is also sold at the local farmers' market, of which Wim was a founding grower. He has been chairman since its inception and has seen it grow from an idea to a busy city business every Saturday morning. "The farmers' market is a big part of us being able to survive here," he says.

Wim has an interest in what goes on beyond the farm gate, having been a committee member representing the tomato sector for almost 20 years. He was elected to Vice Chair in 2002. Being the only tomato grower in the Gisborne district and being so isolated, the networking that comes with the political side of horticulture is valuable.

"You go to a conference and see what's going on and it is interesting stuff."

It is good to have growers represented and doing together what they couldn't do by themselves. "We are able to leverage a lot in research," he says.

Work for the group in recent times has included dealing with psyllid, root

disease, carbon foot print issues, energy efficiency, and integrated pest management (IPM) over the longer term.

There is considerable progress being made in producing things more efficiently and marketing together has been useful, he says.

The product group meets two or three times a year and Wim also represents the sector on HortNZ's Innovation & Research board. He has been on the board since its inception in 2005.

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Challenges for the industry

In Wim's mind, the biggest challenge facing the fresh tomato industry is achieving profitability.

"We have a very miserable year behind us with prices below \$1 in the November/December period," he says.

This was caused by exports to Australia and beyond being shut down due to the discovery of a new organism to New Zealand called Liberibacter. This bacteria-like organism causes tomato plants to die over time and is vectored by a new insect to our country called Tomato and Potato Psyllid.

Tied in with profitability is the Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS). On paper, no-one will be profitable once the scheme comes in, he says.

"The market does rely on supply and demand but sooner or later if enough growers go out of the market, it will come okay again. But if it happens too fast, possibly all the tomato growers all of a sudden say it's not worthwhile any more. What will happen?"

Submissions to the government have asked for tomato growers to be phased in over time to allow the supply and demand factor to work through.

"Growers will have to drop off and the tomato price just has to go up. There is no other way. In the medium-term the price of all produce has to go up."

Glasshouse heating comes into the ETS in 2010.

"It's right here. The new government is trying to sort itself out but at this stage it is going ahead."

Profitability will sort itself out eventually - in recent years the number of growers has dropped from 700 to about 250.

"Economies of scale come in there somewhere and we have had some big properties start up and it becomes harder to compete."

Economies of scale in marketing is another thing harder to do well in this environment for a smaller grower.

"We are so busy growing, let alone thinking about how to get the best price."

An increase in market commission is another issue.

"Depending on who you are or how big you are... the highest rate is 18% that people have to pay for to their marketer. That's a lot of money."

For a grower who turned over \$150,000, that's \$27,000.

"A lot of money," says Wim.

He points to biosecurity definitely being "a big thing" for the industry. Proof of this lies with the Tomato and Potato Psyllid which arrived in New Zealand in 2006. "We have yet to really sort out how we can control it without chemicals."

When spraying for the psyllid, the IPM for whitefly is lost.

The industry body has spent a lot of money trying to work out how to control the psyllid.

Biosecurity New Zealand thought the psyllid vector Liberibacter was not found anywhere else in the world. "So they started telling everybody about it before we had a chance to get our feet on the ground, so all markets closed." Most of the markets are open again but Wim says the episode was very damaging, costing about \$6m in lost income.

In the same family as tomatoes and potatoes, capsicum growers also felt the pain with their markets closed at the same time. "Some of the bigger capsicum growers spend millions getting their plants up to production and not knowing if you have a market is not a nice feeling."

Along with others in horticulture, the tomato sector is looking towards the HortNZ strategy to grow the value of the industry to \$10 billion by 2020.