

# Canoelands Orchard

## CASE STUDY

*A family owned farm built on diversification, engagement with and direct selling to consumers.*



The third generation 40ha Canoelands Orchard land was originally purchased by Cecil Christie in 1923. Previously crown land, Cecil cleared 10ha acres by hand before planting passionfruit, oranges and lemons during the depression. He also ran poultry and gradually moved into stone fruit.

Cecil and Gladys Christie's youngest child, John, purchased the farm in 1970 before marrying now wife Trish. Together they added tomatoes, zucchini, squash to the produce list. Their son Nathan and his wife Jaime now manage the farm. They have three children who, along with Jaime's mum Lyn, all work on the farm.

They are all passionate about what they do, and while the farm is steeped in history, they are not constrained into doing only what the previous generation did. "We realised early on when we took over managing the farm we had to change how we did things or we would simply go out of business. Twenty years ago there were several orchards along this ridge, now we are only ones left," Nathan said.



"Cost of production kept rising and the money we were receiving from the markets (and supermarkets) was either flat lining or dropping. It was really obvious we had to either change how we farm and sell our produce differently, or get out," Jaime said.

"By selling direct to consumers, we could get a premium price for our produce. The hard bit was working out how to do that," Jamie continued. "Opening the farm up to a 'pick your own' model requires a totally different mindset. You have to deal direct with a wide variety of people, most of who are pleasant - but some aren't."

"You have to make the farm an attractive place to come to" Nathan said. "So, we built a farm produce shop, café, BBQ and play areas, have farm animals onsite and offer tractor rides to attract families. Some of our regular customers travel for two hours or more to get here."

Since 2013 Canoelands Orchards has also been producing honey, offering beehive training workshops and hosting school farm tours.

"Because we talk direct to our customers, we can grow and tailor what we do to suit particular needs. For example, many Lebanese customers were asking for a particular type of plum that is harvested early and green. So we dedicated a block of plums to meet their needs, and it is going gangbusters!"

"One of the biggest surprises we found in moving to 'pick your own' sales was a significant reduction in produce wastage. This is because markets and supermarkets require uniform and blemish free produce, which is not the case with 'pick your own'.



*"We had to develop a 'pick your own' process and have staff dedicated to policing this. We provide bright yellow bags and all picked produce is sold by weight."*

*"Some farmers just want to grow produce and sell it in the easiest way possible, ie; direct to a buyer, the supermarkets or at the main fruit and veg market. Previously we did that, but if we didn't change, we would have gone bankrupt."*

*"These days, consumers want to know more about their food, how and where it is produced. We offer that in spades!"*

*"We have less harvest, sorting and transport wastage. And our customers cannot get fresher produce!"*

*"To make this change, you have to change your mindset. You are no longer just a farmer out there in the paddock. You have to become a marketing expert, willing and happy to engage with potential and existing customers using a variety of social media such as Facebook, Instagram and a regularly updated website."*

*The keys to developing new customers, and maintaining existing customers include:*

- *Always be polite and try to accommodate customer needs*
- *Be proactive in marketing and keep your customers up to date*
- *Offer education and a relaxed atmosphere*
- *Being part of a local 'Harvest Trail'.*

For further information:



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