

# Grower co-op creates true family spirit

**Richard Loader**

**T**he family that plays together stays together and kiwifruit packhouse, Birchwood Packhouse has fostered a strong sense of belonging throughout its community of growers, staff and contractors.

Established 30 years ago by a small number of local growers wanting more control and ownership over their fruit, the flourishing grower co-operative now packs-in 150 hectares of fruit each year.

Located in the Bay of Plenty, the heart of kiwifruit country, Birchwood sits just south of Kaitikati with the Kaimai ranges on one side and Tauranga harbour on the other – it is a pretty spot.

Sited on 900sqm, Birchwood is designed so that the fruit is handled from the beginning to end on one site and includes packhouse and state-of-the-art coolstore facilities with storage capacity for everything it packs.

Grower liaison manager for Birchwood Packhouse, Katrina Targett says Birchwood expects to pack 1.6 million trays for its growers this season. Storing fruit according to each grower's KPN, it effectively becomes inventory, and eventually marketed through Zespri.

"Every orchard has a KPN which is their unique identifier," Katrina explains. "Birchwood process the grower's crop which is registered in the Zespri system, offering traceability from gate to plate."

With a genuine care for growers and their fruit, communication and sharing advice has been key to maximising orchard gate returns (OGR).

"That intimate family spirit means there's a connection—we're not just dealing with fruit with a number on it.

"Often when you talk to someone from a bigger facility they feel they're a number.

"We're a small operation and that seems to work to our advantage. There's a mental picture of who that fruit belongs to."

To help growers stay connected, informed and part of the family, Birchwood provides a number of added value services including regular field days and orchard visits.



**Birchwood offers full harvest services and monitors fruit maturity levels to ensure the fruit is picked at the optimal time.**

"It's an ever evolving industry and we nurture our growers," says Katrina.

"We give them technical knowledge to grow better fruit. We do demonstrations on pruning, showing them different methods to achieve an optimum crop. At the end of the day we want export quality fruit and we want our growers to get the best value for the efforts."

Bus trips out of the region provide growers with an opportunity to see what other growers are doing –

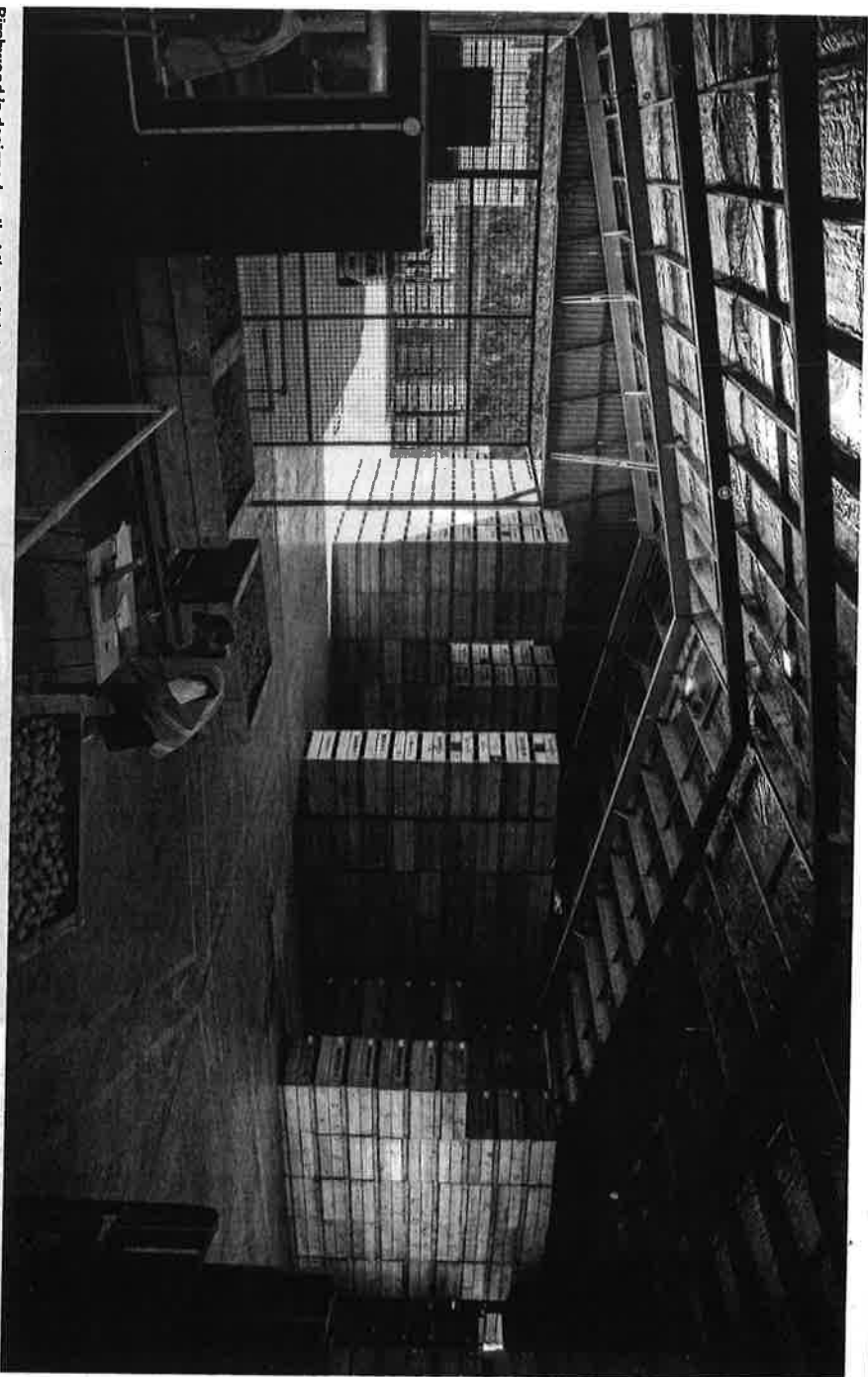
"We have an orchard manager in our team and he looks after around 40ha on behalf of growers.

"He will provide all the contract workers, managing all the activities that occur on orchard—but in collaboration with the grower."

Full harvest and cartage services are offered, monitoring maturity levels and ensuring the fruit is picked at the optimal time.

An orchard leasing option is also available to growers.

"In the end, what ever services our growers choose, our care is about maximising what can be achieved for their orchard," says Katrina.



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