

From garden gate to dinner plate

Anne Boswell visits the Gisborne grower that leads the country in supplying broccoli, watermelon, sweetcorn and lettuce and leads the world in squash.

Last updated 16:27, July 13 2016

Anne Boswell

A LeaderBrand harvester in a broccoli field.

Staff culture is something LeaderBrand chief executive Richard Burke talks about a lot.

It is heavily integrated into the fresh fruit and vegetable company, he says, thanks to loyal employees who have a commitment to the business's success.

He gives examples of this commitment in action but it isn't until we drive up, unannounced, to one of LeaderBrands' fields outside Gisborne city that it becomes apparent he is not exaggerating.

Anne Boswell

LeaderBrand chief executive Richard Burke and picker Anthony Westrupp ensure the freshly-harvested broccoli is of high quality.

A broccoli-harvesting crew is taking a break for lunch, getting stuck into bowlfuls of steaming, fragrant soup, ambrosia on a chilly winter's day.

A smile breaks out over Burke's face, barely concealing his deep pride.

"This isn't a usual lunchtime," he says. "But it is a perfect example of the culture I was talking about. Someone's wife has made a hot lunch for the pickers and is happy to brave the cold and serve it to them. That is really very cool."

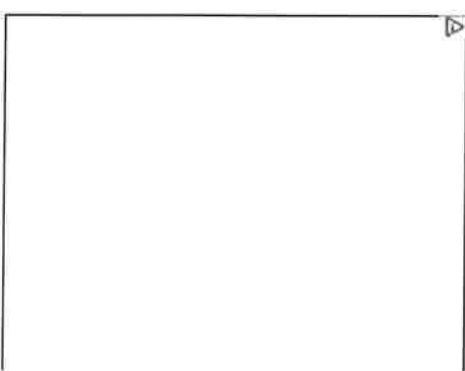
Not bad for a company that has over 250 permanent staff, plus 300 more seasonal workers; it has a small business feel within a large company, something that Burke says reflects the fact that the farm remains the chief focus.

"We are farmers at heart," he says. "We work on the principle that good farmers work good land and produce good quality produce, and that's what we do."

LeaderBrand was founded by Murray McPhail in 1975, a man credited as a visionary of his time.

"Even back then, Murray focused on the needs of his customers while still delivering a product that added value to his business," Burke says. "He always looked at ways to drive the value of the land higher; his direct-to-customer approach was groundbreaking."

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McPhail started growing buttercup squash in Gisborne, which became a successful export business to Japan. During his extensive overseas travel he accumulated ideas to expand his business within the New Zealand market.

He was also instrumental in introducing broccoli, now a firm family favourite, to New Zealand in the 1980s when he saw how popular the vegetable was in North America.

Forty years on, LeaderBrand remains the leading grower-supplier of broccoli, watermelon, sweetcorn and lettuce in the country, and remains a leading grower, packer and exporter of squash worldwide.

And the business shows no sign of slowing down. LeaderBrand crops now cover 2500ha on Gisborne's Poverty Bay Flats, with an additional 1000ha in Pukekohe and Canterbury.

Burke says the expansion to outlying regions has meant the ability to source produce from areas outside of the Gisborne region without compromising freshness, as well as allowing further development in the salad business, the fastest-growing part of the business.

"The additional farms only enhance the Gisborne farm," he says. "They have been a positive addition over the last 5-10 years."

While expanding the farm base has also meant taking advantage of growing conditions unique to different regions, Gisborne remains a special spot to grow crops; its temperate climate is neither too hot nor too cold.

"We have the ability to grow crops without irrigation, and the natural fertility in the heavy clay soils, when you get it right, is hard to beat," Burke says.

In addition to fresh produce, LeaderBrand is also one of Gisborne's largest growers of chardonnay and pinot gris grapes, which started 20 years ago when the business bought a plot of land with grapes on it.

"We have a complicated business because of the huge variety of crops we grow, but it is a great way to manage risk in the domestic and export market," he says.

LeaderBrand has invested heavily in infrastructure for the fastest growing part of the business, its range of convenience products. This includes vacuum packed sweetcorn and most recently beetroot, ready to serve produce with a stable shelf life and no additives – just 100 per cent quality vegetables.

Burke says a large part of LeaderBrand's success is a result of listening to consumers and creating solutions to their problems – which is predominantly finding fresh, healthy foods that are convenient in a society that is time-poor.

He says many businesses have the "this is what we've got – take it or leave it" attitude, when in fact they should be catering to what their customers want and striving for improvement.

In Gisborne, building is underway for a new 130-metre in-line salad processing facility for LeaderBrand's increasing variety of packaged salads. Post-harvest cooling technology is cutting edge here as well, as getting the produce cooled from field temperature is key to their longevity.

This investment in infrastructure is crucial to LeaderBrand's desire to be in full control of the process, from the seedlings in the nursery right through to distribution – from garden gate to dinner plate, as the tagline goes.

LeaderBrand vegetables start their lives as seeds in the transplant nursery, which takes care of the seedlings from germination to transplantation into the fields. The fully automated seeders and fertilisers and seedling tray tables on rails means the large nursery can be run by just three people.

All cropping fields are laser-levelled and tile-drained in preparation for planting. The biggest issue the company faces in Gisborne is water sitting on the field, but thanks to the drainage even heavy rainfall has little negative impact.

"Groundwork is very important," Burke says. "GPS technology and advances in science and soil culture have been significant for us."

A team of agronomists, operational staff and machinists work from the farm office on King Rd, where yet another large implement shed is being built to house the forever-expanding fleet of machinery.

"We are a bit heavy on the horsepower here but when the conditions are right, we need to go for it," Burke says.

The LeaderBrand picking crews are out in the field five-six days a week, 52 weeks a year. When it is busy, crews of 20-30 people harvest broccoli, lettuce and baby leaf and ensure the produce gets to the chillers quickly. The pickers are dedicated people, valued greatly by the company.

Winter is the "quiet" time of the year for LeaderBrand but there is still plenty of action. Winter crops are picked, machinery is maintained, infrastructure is built and fields are prepared for spring planting.

Burke is a passionate man; not only about the rugby (LeaderBrand staunchly supports and sponsors Poverty Bay rugby), or the company he runs, but about the agricultural industry as a whole.

He says two challenges face the industry that have the ability to make or break New Zealand's reputation as world leaders in agriculture – infrastructure and people.

Like many other companies based far from main centres, LeaderBrand relies on its ability to grow, harvest, package and deliver fresh produce in a timely, efficient manner to sustain a successful business.

"Infrastructure is critical to the continued success of businesses in outlying areas and the Government needs to get in behind the regions and invest in their future far more," Burke says.

"The population is increasing by 60,000 people each year and those people need fresh food and somewhere to live. Growers are now competing with property developers for land. If New Zealanders want fresh, cost-effective food on their tables the Government has to support regional businesses to produce food for the local market, not to mention the worldwide market.

"That support needs to come in the form of improved infrastructure, transport and energy for regional New Zealand."

He also feels strongly about attracting young people with a variety of skills into the industry.

"Most people in agriculture have either fallen into the industry by mistake or were born into it – I fell into it myself, driving a sprayer and cutting broccoli.

"We need to attract people from all backgrounds with different sets of skills. While farming is a practical, hands-on job it is also one that requires an intellectual approach. We have so many roles within our company - from lawyers to accountants, marketers and sales people, agronomists, machine operators and engineers."

Burke says LeaderBrand has a simple but meaningful objective – to become New Zealand's healthiest food company.

"It is ironic that people are claiming that space while they are making 'food' in a laboratory," he says. "We need to change our view of what the best health food companies look like."

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