

Hothouse trial hoping to slash plastic twine use

VEGETABLE GROWER

NZ Hothouse Ltd has always been ahead of the game when it comes to sustainability, but new innovations are coming thick and fast.

Decades after they first began harvesting rainwater to nourish their tomatoes and cucumbers, the company is now trialling compostable twine and truss clips and hope to roll it out site-wide as soon as possible. The move will divert an astonishing 12,000km of plastic twine from landfill every year, as it can simply be composted along with other green waste.



NZ Hothouse founder Brett Wharfe.

NZ Hothouse sales and marketing team member, Claudia Wharfe, says all crops are grown vertically, winding around twine suspended overhead. The growing facility spans 19ha across two sites.

"In a year, we use enough twine to stretch from New Zealand to Los Angeles, so that's a lot of plastic waste," says Claudia.

"We have previously trialled compostable growing materials, but none were suitable. Now with new developments and redesigns, we believe making the switch to compostable is achievable. We've been trialling various options over the last 12 months and hope to roll it out across

the whole business next year."

The company prides itself on its eco-friendly approach and recyclable packaging, alongside its family culture. The business was founded 40 years ago by Claudia's father, Brett Wharfe, and continues to employ multiple family members plus a long-standing team – "so they feel like family too".

Today, cherry tomatoes account for half of NZ Hothouse's total production with about 8-10 million punnets harvested each season from

PROPER SNACKING VARIETIES

OVER FOUR decades, the company has grown to become a major supplier of tomatoes and cucumbers to domestic consumers. Their cherry and strawberry tomatoes are currently packed and sold under Woolworth's and Foodstuff's own brands (Woolworth's and Pams).

Claudia says snacking varieties have skyrocketed in popularity in recent years as consumers gravitate towards convenience and pre-packaged items.

"When we first started growing cherry tomatoes 20 years ago it was a niche variety and we produced 500,000 hand-

packed punnets each year. Now we're packing 8-10 million punnets using state of the art machinery. We've seen massive growth in the last 3-5 years."

NZ Hothouse is a long-time member of United Fresh and a keen supporter of industry collaboration and promotion.

"We're proud to be part of this industry and offer something to Kiwis that has a positive outcome and keeps our country healthy."

"Our slogan is 'from our house to yours', so that really encapsulates what we're trying to do."

their Bombay site. Other tomato varieties such as cocktail truss, Roma (low acid) and loose tomatoes, plus 7-8 million Telegraph cucumbers, are grown and packed at the company's second site in Karaka.

Claudia says people often question why cucumbers are individually wrapped in plastic.

"Firstly, the wrapper that we use is 100% recyclable so it can go in with the soft plastics. And secondly, the reason why it's wrapped is because of the really high water content in cucumbers. If they're not wrapped, you'll have a 2-3 day shelf life. So, by the time it's picked, put into crates and sent to store, you've already lost a day. Then they might sit on the shelf for a day so the consumer loses out in the end."

"We did a trial with Woolworths many years ago because they wanted to see what it would be like in store without wrapping. And the food wastage was astronomical. So ultimately, it's about allowing the consumer enough time for optimal eating."

NZ Hothouse has invested heavily in automated packhouse machinery in recent years, and continues to keep a close eye on technological developments. The business currently employs 300 people during the peak summer harvest.

"There's been a lot of gains in automation and robotics over the last five years which helps us get to market quicker. And because we're more efficient, we can offer better quality and value to customers. I think automation has been a great win for the whole industry. But everything that we grow is handpicked by staff and all of our crop work is done by hand."

Pests and diseases remain the number one challenge. NZ Hothouse employs a dedicated 'bug scout' to identify crop problems and uses integrated pest management to tackle common issues such as introducing Encarsia wasps to keep on top of whitefly.

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