

Interview with up-and-coming young Primary Industry leader Sarah Wilson

By Catherine Bryant



Sarah Wilson Agricultural and Horticultural Science Student 2022, Bethlehem College

What inspired you to take Agricultural and Horticultural Science at Bethlehem College in 2020?

Growing up in the township of Te Puke a lot of my parent's friends were already connected to the horticultural industry in some way. My neighbour was an engineer working in a kiwifruit pack house. My parents don't work in the Primary Industries, however they did a lot of research for me and they were the ones that suggested I should think about the sector as a possible career path for myself.

They created a network of people for me to talk to prior, so that I could get a better understanding of what the industry was like. This was when I was deciding which subjects to take in Year 13, that would lead me on to further study at university. There were talks of doing a business degree or going into other science subjects, however I felt that the Agricultural and Horticultural Science subject offered at Bethlehem College was a good mixture of everything that I'm passionate about.

I had also known a few people who were above me at school and went on to do some awesome things. One was working at Southern Cross Horticulture and another

one was at Massey University studying Agribusiness. She had been on trips to Asia and had other amazing opportunities.

On top of that, I had been to a career expo, where ZESPRI, NZKGI and quite a few of other companies in the Kiwifruit industry attended. It was all those three things together that made me think, Agricultural and Horticultural Science had some really great opportunities. It wasn't until I was about to take NCEA Level 3 in Year 13 that I became really interested.

Did you feel that Agricultural and Horticultural Science complimented your other Year 13 subjects?

Year 13 Agricultural and Horticultural Science was one of the best courses I took at High School as it covered a lot of bases, such as Economics, through to actual practical application. It was a good balance, and we looked at things like free trade agreements, quality assurance, and that set me up so well for my university degree.

Was this just an Agricultural and Horticultural Science class or did it incorporate Agribusiness?

We only had Agricultural and Horticultural Science at Bethlehem College but by Year 13, it had incorporated more

business aspects, such as what's going on in the marketplace. You're out there in your vege garden growing your carrots, but you also get to see what's going on post-harvest, where those carrots are going, changing market forces and quality standards.

You enjoyed the practical learning, what else did you enjoy about the subject?

I think it was that mix between the practical and the academic side where you got to go out and see what was happening. We had garden plots at school, where we would do test patches and experiment with different rates of fertiliser. For example, the plots with more nitrogen had big green leaves, but the carrots were not as big. The ones that had been given more potassium had grown bigger carrots but had less leaves. Seeing what impact these different practices had on the growth of our food was very interesting and relevant to the real world.

As a high achieving person, did you find the subject challenging?

Yes, absolutely we had an awesome teacher Helen McKoy that set us up for wins, which like in anything, if you have people setting you up to win, then it's always a good feeling. I learned a lot as it's not just Agriculture and Horticulture. It takes in so many different subjects, there is always a challenge and something to learn and if there's something you're especially interested in, you can learn more about it.

The ZESPRI conference in Year 13 that you attended, was it really inspiring for you?

Through our Agricultural and Horticultural Science class, we were invited to attend a ZESPRI conference and Young Grower of the Year Awards. It was my first ever taste into networking events and was such a great opportunity. I left the conference just buzzing! We had awesome speakers that had come from around the world, and they talked about the future of supermarkets and how we must be innovating ahead of supermarkets overseas.

With so much new technology developing around the world, New Zealand must be ahead of the game. We must be even more sustainable, so that we're creating value. That's what ZESPRI does, and it's not because kiwifruit are expensive to produce, but it's because they've managed to create value throughout the supply chain.

At the end of Year 13, how did you make the ultimate decision to study a Bachelor of International Agribusiness at Massey University, from which you graduate this year?

My original plan was to do a straight Business Studies degree, I didn't want to close any doors and to keep my options open, but the more I thought about it, the more I thought it would be wise to keep an industry tied to the business degree and it was the best decision I ever made.

Studying Agricultural and Horticultural Science meant that I had an industry tied to it, I had companies tied to it, I had potential scholarships tied to it, so many opportunities to go overseas.

I went to Mexico working for Nestlé last summer and I'm off to Thailand and Malaysia in a few weeks with the Southeast Asia Pacific Excellence Trade Group. I have had so many opportunities that I would never have got, if I didn't have a niche degree. It differentiates you from a lot of other people.

How did you get to go to Thailand?

When I was in Mexico with Nestlé, there was another person on the Prime Minister's Scholarship for Agriculture working with me. He suggested I come and join the Southeast Asia Pacific Excellence Group. It's a group of young people, who are interested in trade in the Southeast Asian markets. For ZESPRI and for a lot of other Agriculture and Horticulture exporters that's one of our biggest and developing markets, so it's important that we are establishing relationships in those markets. I went along to some of their events and then applied for the position.

Can you tell me more about the two internships that you have been on as part of your degree requirements at Massey?

As part of my degree, you must do two practicums, which are 12-week internships at a company. My first one was with ZESPRI and my second one was in Mexico at Nestlé as their Agricultural intern. During the ZESPRI internship, I was part of the Quality Assurance team, and my role was to analyse the product notification systems.

Going to Mexico was amazing and such an incredible opportunity, to see Mexican agriculture, the similarities, and

the differences. I applied for the opportunity through the Prime Minister's Scholarship. It's a different challenge over there, ours is sustainable regenerative agriculture but theirs is just getting farmers above the poverty line. It's a lot more fragmented, their producers are smaller, rather than in New Zealand, with bigger farms and wealthier farmers.

Being the head of the Hort Society at Massey University, can you tell me a bit about what the organisation does?

The Hort Society is for people who are passionate about the horticulture industry and who are keen to learn more about it. We do a lot of networking events, go to conferences, bring people in to speak at Massey and learn about what's going on in the New Zealand horticultural industry. Our last networking event, we went up to the Bay of Plenty to have a look at some kiwifruit orchards and pack houses.

Can you tell me a bit about your role being on the IFAMA Youth Board?

That is the International Food and Agribusiness Management Association. They have a youth board in the Oceania region. The idea is to get youth interested in Agricultural and Horticultural Science and in a similar vein we have networking events. Because it's Oceania wide a lot of it is online and have meetings and networking events over zoom. We have just launched our inaugural venture building challenge, we had teams from all around the world competing.

What is your role with Grassroots in social media?

I work every Monday with Grassroots. They're all women who have agricultural backgrounds but have ended up doing media and communications. We work for a range of agricultural clients

throughout New Zealand. I work for Forestry Careers, and they work with getting young people into forestry. It has been a great opportunity and what is evident is that all these industries have the same issues, there's not enough women or enough young people coming through. I am trying to get the word out there, trying to spark conversations or get people thinking about the opportunities that are there.

Why do you think there's not enough young people coming into the industry seeing as it has all these massive benefits?

I think it's just a lack of exposure, they don't know enough about what's out there. When people think about the agricultural and horticultural industries, they immediately think of early morning starts and hard physical labour. There are a lot of jobs like that, but not all of them, we need people in marketing, engineering, and technology. There's so many different roles and people just need to know about them.

What do you love about the Primary Industries?

Lots of people are really keen to have young people that are passionate about the Primary Industries, there's such a shortage of skills in our sector. Ultimately, it's the people in the Primary Industries, they're humble and down to earth, good New Zealanders and that's why there's such a tightness in the industry.

What do you want to do when you leave university?

I would love to add real value to the industry. I want to possibly end up in consulting, and use what I've learned to help people. I have enjoyed marketing, but with the bigger companies a lot is done offshore and harder to get into. I am really interested in the trade industry, the bilateral agreements and going to see different cultures and talking up the New Zealand agricultural and horticultural industry. We have such a competitive advantage in New Zealand, however we must keep up our clean green image to keep our edge in the sector.



Past students of Teacher of Agricultural and Horticultural Science, Helen McKoy, from Bethlehem College, spanning ten years.