



Ripe and ripening Queen pineapples

Pineapple harvest in Northland

Owen and Linda Schafli have started harvesting New Zealand's first commercial scale pineapple crop.

By Wendy Laurenson

This year they hope to pick between 5,000 and 10,000 pineapples from their 22,000 plants, and expect to increase their harvest to 50,000 pineapples a year as younger plants come into production in the next few years.

Owen Schafli grew tropical fruit in South Africa before moving to New Zealand with his wife Linda in 2008. "After a few years in Hamilton," he says, "we bought this property near Whangarei to grow mainly bananas and pineapples. We initially planted several banana varieties and they've been our cash crop while we've built up our pineapple plant numbers and prepared the land. By the end of this year we plan to have 30,000 pineapple plants in the ground."

They decided to focus on pineapples to make the best use of their sloping property. "When we bought this 6.8

**22,000
PINEAPPLE
PLANTS**

hectare block it was mostly in re-growth bush and gorse around a river basin. Nearly half of it is QEII National Trust Reserve and we've gradually cleared and planted pockets on the rest of it for the bananas, but we don't have enough plantable land for them to be commercially viable long-term.

We'll continue with the bananas, but growing pineapples makes better economic use of our smallholding and we've proven that they consistently grow well here."

The variety they have chosen is Queen, a small gourmet pineapple that is super-sweet, is deep golden yellow inside and out, has an edible core, and multiplies faster than some varieties. It's an old cultivar still grown in Australia, India and South Africa for fresh fruit rather than canning. It also has a better tolerance of cold, disease and stress than Cayenne, the main pineapple variety imported here.

"Cayenne is a major commercial pineapple variety worldwide," Linda explains, "and is well suited for large scale harvesting and processing because the big fruit fits the cans with little waste. The plants are usually sprayed to induce uniform flowering and harvest times, and are picked unripe then gas ripened for fresh fruit export. We chose Queen to give New Zealanders the option of a super-sweet locally grown pineapple that is spray free and available nearly year-round."

It has taken seven years for Owen and Linda to build up numbers of their Queen pineapples. "We bought the first ones from a friend who was growing them in a glasshouse," Owen says, "trialed them in mounds on our higher ground here, and when we knew they would grow and fruit well we started taking suckers to build up plant numbers."

Pineapples like warmth, protection from frost, rich slightly acid soil, and free-draining ground. "They're in the bromeliad family so they like humidity and are slightly more cold-hardy than bananas, but they hate wet cold ground, so I've hand rotavated our sloping lower blocks then made mounds for planting. We don't have a tractor partly because of the sloping ground and partly lack of space. We plant the suckers straight into the mounds in October when the ground has warmed up, and we've now realised we can plant four rows in one mound for optimal land use without crowding the plants. We also protect some of the lower blocks with frost-cover during the cooler months."

When the Schaflis were making use of every small sucker, the plants took two to four years to flower, but that has now halved because they're able to start with larger suckers. It takes a further few months from flowering to pineapple harvest. Plants can also be grown from the pineapple tops, but this is slower.

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While people think of pineapples as a desert plant, they do need enough moisture for the developing fruit to fill out and mature. "Ideally pineapples love a hot wet summer," Owen says, "but so far we've managed to get away without irrigation despite Northland's recent dry summers. We usually have the advantage of humidity and our crop is year-round so we're not dependent on one season's weather."

Linda and Owen have specific roles in the project and have recently been joined by their son Colin. "I was teaching to support our income," Linda says, "but had to give that up a couple of years ago when I had a health issue, so Colin came home to help out. Owen is the grower and on-the-ground man, I do the admin, and Colin's strength is IT and management. We're hoping that as our pineapple numbers get into five figures, we'll still be able to handle it as a family unit."

At the moment, pineapple harvest is into wheelbarrows and an old small four-wheel-drive car. "Despite their prickly leaves, pineapples are reasonably easy to harvest and handle, and they have a good shelf life" Owen says. "At this time of year we wait until the fruit is fully orange before picking it, but in August and September we pick as soon as there is a bit of orange (to prevent the core going brown) then it colours up in about a week."

The Schaflis are known locally because they regularly sell bananas at the Whangarei Growers' Market. "We're now adding pineapples to our stall and we're already investigating supplying selected local restaurants and cafés. Later, we'll explore other selling options around the country." ●

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