



Papaya growing under cover in the Waipū orchard

Promising papaya potential for the north

In the Northland region of New Zealand, Sara Bennett and Andrew Withell are growing subtropical fruit for the Kiwi market using sustainable principles. HELENA O'NEILL talks to the couple about their journey from a subtropical nursery to selling fruit under their own brand, Aotearoa Grown.

Sara and Andrew's journey with tropical fruit began with Subtropicals Aotearoa, a subtropical plant nursery. They specialise in edible subtropical fruit trees, a wide range of edible bananas and some rare and hard-to-find collectors' plants.

Sara says their philosophy is to sell people plants where we grow them as well, where we have learned what they require to grow in Aotearoa.

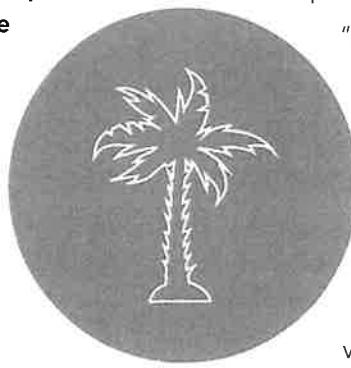
"We learn by doing, share our learnings, and we're frank and honest with people about what they need to grow."

Starting with bananas, the couple have now planted papaya, jackfruit, starfruit (carambola),

chocolate (black) sapote, yangmei, mombin, rollinia, finger limes, sapodilla, cinnamon and at least six different types of tropical passionfruit.

"Bananas are a good place to start because they are relatively easy to source and there are other growers around," Andrew says.

"I think there are varieties like Misi Lukī that are suited to this country; they grow well here. We've sourced more and more different varieties, and we've been trialling them to see how they grow outside but also under cover. We have about 40 to 50 varieties that we are just watching and seeing how they grow and what the fruit tastes like."





"The weather has been very tropical." Subtropicals Aotearoa's plantings outside cover about half of their property

He says that while a lot of New Zealanders are used to Cavendish bananas, many of the varieties they grow are a lot sweeter.

"Everyone has a different preference, but we think the Goldfinger is probably the best. It's a Honduran hybrid, slower growing but it's very sweet and tangy."

Sara adds: "The pineapple Ladyfinger tastes like pineapple lumps without the chocolate. It does depend on where you come from, if you've had an experience growing up with a particular banana then it's very exciting when you can grow it here."

Sara and Andrew sell at the monthly Roving Rural Market at Waipū and recently began running a stall at the Grey Lynn Farmers' Market in Auckland.

Selling tropical fruit at farmers' markets was really rewarding as people would be excited to find exotic fruit and favourites from their homelands, she says.



We've been pretty stunned to have people coming back week after week and selling out each time

"We had an amazing conversation with a guy who said that he had dreamt of making a traditional plantain dish for his girlfriend as a special treat. He had no idea where he

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Sara and Andrew started out growing bananas before venturing into more exotic tropical fruit

was going to get one, but that week we had plantain for sale and so he was thrilled to be able to find some. That was lovely."

The couple decided to create their own brand, Aotearoa Grown, to sell their own produce along with tropical fruit from other like-minded growers.

"We knew that there was a national market and we as a sole grower couldn't meet the national market. So we developed a brand and a box to ship tropical fruit in. We work with other growers to supply fruit to us and we ship the fruit."

With the courier network being under pressure in recent months, the couple have paused online orders, but plan to restart once challenges have been resolved.

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Tropical fruits are so good for you. Take papaya, for example, it's a superfood

There is also growing demand from local and Auckland restaurants for New Zealand-grown tropical fruit. The tropical fruit industry is still growing and is full of potential, Andrew says.

"There's a great little network of growers now."

With a wide range of subtropical fruit growing in their orchard, they have great hopes for New Zealand-grown papaya.

"We're the first to grow papaya on a commercial scale, and we've been pretty stunned to have people coming back week after week and selling out each time," he says.

"This is our first large papaya crop. We grow them under cover in large commercial tunnel houses and we're quadrupling our production for next year. It's really exciting, and there are different varieties that we're experimenting with."

While the couple have no formal background in horticulture, Sara says they have been growing plants all their lives.

"We've come from families who have grown food on a non-commercial basis and had big, interesting gardens. We bought a small lifestyle block and started experimenting with what we could grow. We love subtropical fruit... and then it evolved over time. It started mostly in bananas, but we were interested in diversity and working with nature."

They incorporate syntropic and permaculture principles in their orchard and believe in feeding the soil to create the best food for people.

"We looked at what we could grow that would be climate-change resilient, that would grow food in this environment, and grow in ways that the inputs were minimal. We've become a sustainable system over time."

All fruit is picked and washed by hand, and Sara describes the business as a low-tech operation. About one hectare of their Waipū property is planted, half growing under cover in six-metre-long high tunnels and half growing outside.

With recent cyclones hammering parts of the country, Sara is glad they chose to use tunnel houses for a large portion of their crops.

"The weather has been very tropical. Other than the wind, the bananas love the heat and the water. Tunnel house growing is very important I think, because other than the wind you can rest easy that everything is safe and secure in this weather."

Sara says the tunnel houses are open and diverse ecosystems.

"The insects and quails come in and out; the pheasants thought we had built a giant pheasant house. It's an open, dynamic system. The breeze comes through, the rain comes in the sides, and it's a diverse and vibrant ecosystem. Within these covered systems we have diverse plantings, we don't mono-crop and we have grass growing on the ground."

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We're quadrupling our production for next year. It's really exciting

"Some tropical fruits need a dry season to set and hold fruit - too much cold rain and they would get crown rot and die. The papaya, for example, would rot and die without a cover," she says.

Bacterial crown rot (BCR) is considered one of the most important diseases affecting papaya. First reported in Java in 1931, the disease, which is caused by the bacterium *Erwinia papayaee* has spread to many of the major papaya-growing countries of the world.

"One of the advantages of diverse plantings is that they work well and support each other. Things like bananas don't really have pests in this country so you don't need to spray at all," Andrew says.

They plant and grow what they sell, and plants that they don't grow from seed themselves are sourced from other growers who share their values and approaches.

As the couple expand their growing area, Sara hopes more people will include New Zealand-grown tropical fruit in their diets.

"Tropical fruits are so good for you. Take papaya, for example, it's a superfood, really good for gut health, has a low to moderate glycaemic index (GI) which is great for weight loss, and it's an amazing first food for babies. It's really high in vitamin C too."

"Demand for New Zealand-grown fruit and produce is really strong. Consumers are becoming more educated about the value of locally-grown produce, and the values associated with it. The demand for each fruit is pretty strong across the board," Sara says. "We're great believers in Northland as a tropical fruit-growing region. It certainly has a lot of potential!" ●

AOTEAROA GROWN TROPICAL FRUITS:



papaya



jackfruit



starfruit (carambola)



chocolate (black) sapote



yangmei



mombin



rollinia



finger limes



sapodilla



cinnamon



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