



Growing organic kiwis

Alice Bulmer visits the Brawn family, organic kiwifruit growers in the Bay of Plenty.

Davey and Juliette Brawn's organic kiwifruit orchard is a tiny oasis at the epicentre of New Zealand's large export kiwifruit industry. It's on the road to Maketu, with the beach just a few kilometres down the road.

The three-hectare property, which they've owned for twelve years, is called The Enchanted Wood. It's named after one of Juliette's favourite childhood books, *The Enchanted Wood* – with a pun added. Their kiwifruit orchard is a mere 1.3 ha. (The standard is four or five ha.) Choosing to grow kiwifruit here was pretty obvious, Davey says. It's a case of 'when in Rome...'

Davey grew up on a sheep and beef farm in Te Puke, and his father is still there. And Juliette says she's always been organically minded. The *Organic NZ* moon planting calendar is hanging in the kitchen, and the garlic bed is prepared and waiting for the 24th of June.

But they didn't start out completely organic. When they first put the kiwifruit in, the vines were being sprayed. "And it was so close to the house – I said, 'I just can't do this,'" says Juliette. So Davey made the call. "It was all or nothing."

With small block horticulture, organics makes economic sense, he says. "If you do it right, the numbers stack up." They get a premium for organic kiwifruit, and this year they also got a premium for the 'early start' fruit at the beginning of the season. However, Juliette says she has mixed feelings about the price difference between organic and conventionally grown fruit, since it discourages people from buying organic.

There are quite a few other organic kiwifruit growers in the area, and Juliette is on the COKA (Certified Organic Kiwifruit Association) committee.

Davey also works fulltime as a boiler operator for a local timber company. He's

always had two jobs, apart from a short time working on the family farm. Juliette looks after the wwoofers and German home-stay students who attend the local high school, as well as being a full-time home-educating mum to Kady (18) and Jack (15).

Developing the orchard

Developing the kiwifruit orchard has taken the better part of a decade. The vines were planted in 2005, and they are just coming into full production now. This is the first year that the orchard has paid for itself, Juliette says.

Davey propagated the plants himself. They were grown in the nursery for a year, before being planted out. He grew 5000 seedlings, kept the best for the orchard and sold 4000. "We ended up making money on it."

Organic methods

The orchard is managed organically with the help of an orchard manager. Soil tests

are done annually, and they use lots of liquid vermicast, which they buy in. Sheep forage under the canopy during the winter – when I visited Davey was just waiting for the contractor (i.e. Jack) to finish building sheep protection for the vines.

Davey does a lot of the work himself. He also uses wwoofers. They try to get two at a time, so they can keep each other company in the orchard. In the middle of winter they had a break before the current wwoofer returned on 30 June to start the winter pruning, cutting back the male vines.

Kiwifruit have female and male plants, and the orchard has a strip of male plants every second row. The bays (the space between four posts) are double planted, with two females in each bay. This means each plant doesn't have to produce so many fruit, so they will be less stressed and more disease resistant.

They have had a bit of PSA, but not much – no plants have died of it. However they have lost some plants to another disease, *Armillaria* or honey fungus, a crossover from the chestnut orchard that was on the site previously.

"We just maintain soil and plant health. If the plants are healthy and strong, there's less susceptibility to disease," says Davey.

Despite being bordered by conventional kiwifruit orchards they've only had

problems with spraydrift twice, several years ago. They have a really good relationship with the manager of the neighbouring conventionally grown orchard.

Growing young kiwis

The Brawns are not just raising kiwifruit, but also two bright, confident young adults. Juliette's home-educating method is called 'unschooling'. It's an educational philosophy which says that children learn most effectively through self-directed education and life experiences.

Kady is a talented musician with a passion for languages. She works as a nanny and as a bartender, and spends her earnings on overseas experience. She went to Europe at 15 and stayed for three months with a host family. On her last trip she spent seven months in Germany, and went to school there. Now she's doing NCEA Level 3 by correspondence, through her own choice.

Her younger brother Jack is already experienced not just at working in his parents' orchard, but also at negotiating work contracts. It started with the chickens – he didn't like the weekly rate his father offered him to look after them, so he negotiated a better contract.

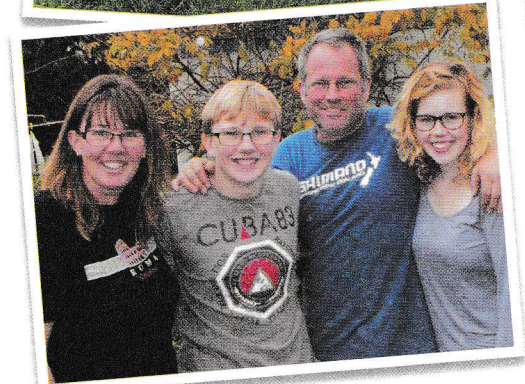
Right now Jack has a contract to build sheep protection in the orchard. It's been a bit harder than he expected, but that's part of the learning process. Davey says he and Juliette have tried to give the kids a realistic view of what's involved in running a business.

Beyond the orchard

When the Brawns bought the property there were already many fruit trees – plums, pears and citrus. Juliette and Jack sell mandarins (Satsumas and Encores) at the gate.

There are also a couple of heifers, eleven chickens and a rooster, and some beehives belonging to a friend. Strolling among the fruit trees is Wilbur, a huge, eight-year-old Saddleback boar who has been here since he was a piglet.

Farming and horticulture



Top: Jack with Wilbur the affectionate pig. He's never going to be bacon – he has a lifetime pass, the Brawns say firmly.

Above: Juliette, Jack, Davey and Kady Brawn.

Page opposite: Jack, Juliette and Davey Brawn in the orchard. In mid-winter there are still a few kiwifruit on the vines – rejects that were too small at harvest time. Some of the sheep protection structures are visible in the background.

Photos: Alice Bulmer

They're about to start building a tiny cottage for Kady so she can have some personal space. There's plenty of room on this property for the family to grow. ☐

Alice Bulmer is a writer and musician who lives in Hamilton-Kirikiri. She loves writing about local food issues. Her website is www.waikatofoodbasket.co.nz.

The Enchanted Wood at a glance

- 1.602 ha kiwifruit block; 1.285 canopy
- Soil: free draining, very good
- Vines planted in 2005
- Variety: Hayward on Bruno rootstock
- Certified organic by BioGro since 2008
- Production last year: 8000 crates per ha
- 873 plants: 714 female, 178 male



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