



## Nature's way leads to global presence

More than 50 years of on-farm experience has taught Victorian grower Peter Schreurs that the greatest rewards are reaped by working with the environment, reports Graham Gosper. Photography by Joe Castro.

**P**eter Schreurs has been growing and selling vegetables for more than half a century but he has never been more confident about the direction his family business is taking.

"Sustainable farming practices help us address problems that have plagued the industry for decades and offer workable solutions to the challenges ahead," he said.

Together with his three sons, Peter, 68, operates a 160-hectare vegetable farm at Devon Meadows near Cranbourne, Victoria. They supply more than six million leeks annually to markets throughout

“Sustainable farming practices help us address problems that have plagued the industry for decades and offer workable solutions to the challenges ahead.”

Australia along with parsnip, baby cos lettuce, baby endive, baby wombok, kohlrabi and radicchio. Peter Schreurs and Sons has captured more than 50 per cent of annual Australian leek exports to Japan and supplies export markets in Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan.

#### Sustainable success

Over the past six years Peter and his sons have established the business as a leader in the introduction of sustainable farming practices. Soil biology development, minimum tillage, Integrated Pest Management (IPM), wind break development and the use of recycled water as part of the irrigation system are among the successful programs they are implementing.

The programs have resulted in a range of benefits for the business including reductions in pesticide use, reductions in diesel and labour costs, increased yields and a guaranteed supply of water during dry times.

Peter believes the key to his business's success is a straightforward approach involving the careful application of expert knowledge.

"Having the information you need to succeed in the vegetable industry is of little use if you don't have the skills to apply it, and the



best way to develop those skills is through practical experience," he said.

Peter has applied that philosophy since starting his first job on a vegetable farm on the outskirts of Melbourne in 1955. He was 16 at the time and had arrived in Australia less than 12 months earlier after emigrating from The Netherlands with his mother, father and seven siblings. Over the next three years he saved enough for a deposit on eight hectares of land at Cranbourne.

In 1964 he left his job and, with the help of his new wife Odilia, began growing his own potatoes, lettuce and later celery. In the years that followed he expanded his holding and diversified into other crops as his sons Mark, Darren and Paul joined the business. The family planted their first crop of leeks in 1986 and three years later purchased and began developing the farm at Devon Meadows.

#### Invest in healthy soil

Peter said the lessons he learned as he worked to establish the business laid the foundation for its future development and helped set it on a course towards the sustainable practices it uses today.

"Henry Mounsey, the vegetable farmer who gave me my first job, taught me about the need for vibrant, healthy soil and how to focus on doing things well rather than the money I could make. I gained much insight into the need for growers to adapt quickly to meet the changing demands of consumers by doing my own marketing for 44 years," he said.

"The years of practical experience also gave me an important insight into farming—they taught me over and over again that you achieve much better results when you work with your environment rather than against it."

That realisation is one of the reasons Peter and his sons have been quick to recognise the benefits of sustainable farming. Peter first witnessed what could be achieved with IPM during a trip to Holland in 1998.

When his business encountered pesticide resistance problems in the leek crops a few months later, Peter's son Darren introduced an IPM program with the help of IPM Technologies Pty Ltd. The program was an immediate success and was quickly extended to all crops, dramatically cutting

## Nature's way, global presence

pesticide use on the farm over the next few years.

### Recycled water beats the dry

Peter said the introduction of recycled water to supplement farm supplies has been another highlight of the sustainable practices program. The business is among 60 customers in the Cranbourne-Clyde area who buy recycled Melbourne waste water. The water is supplied by private company Earth Tech in partnership with Melbourne Water under an irrigation scheme that began about two years ago.

"The recycled water is high in nutrients and it has already helped us through some dry times," Peter said. "That means less lost production due to water shortages and the assured supply has given us the ability to undertake crop expansion with confidence."

Peter said the first lessons he learnt about soil health are being incorporated in another key area of the sustainability program his business has undertaken.

"We are continually finding new ways to boost biological activity in the soil and we now use minimum tillage for the planting of all but one of our crop lines," he said.

our national and export markets."

In addition to the economic benefits from the business's involvement in sustainable farming, Peter believes that the initiatives have

“ Recycled water is high in nutrients and it has already helped us through some dry times. The assured supply has given us the ability to undertake crop expansion with confidence. ”

Peter said much of the expert knowledge the business uses today comes from specialist consultants or from those leading the increasingly well-targeted research and development projects of recent years. "We still place a lot of emphasis on developing the practical skills needed to apply that knowledge properly," he said. "That policy has served us well over the years. It has enabled the business to build a reputation for consistently producing quality vegetables and given us an edge when it comes to developing both

boosted the satisfaction the family gets from day to day operations. "We feel that what we are doing today is more in harmony with what nature intended."

