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# MAKING FARMING A FAMILY AFFAIR



## WHEN AN ORCHARD CAME UP FOR SALE NEXT-DOOR TO HIS FATHER'S VEGETABLE FARM, DAVID BUGEJA JUMPED AT THE OPPORTUNITY.



The Bugeja family has been growing vegetables in the Richmond area of the Hawkesbury Valley for more than 50 years. Six of David's seven brothers own vegetable farms on the same lane as David and his father, while his seventh brother has bought a property in the cropping district of Cowra.

David's property, Riverview Produce, covers about 8ha on river flats on the Hawkesbury River.

"The property had fruit trees when we bought it, but after a couple of years we found that we were struggling to make any money with the fruit. As the river flats are quite fertile, we thought it might be better to pull out the trees and move into vegetables," said David.

The farm has concentrated on producing a few main varieties of vegetables, suitable to the area's growing conditions.

"Lots of farmers pull out of something because it doesn't sell one year, but if you do that, you can end up chasing the market," said David. "I've found shoppers always come back around, so it is better to keep in the crops that grow best in the region you are in."

The possibility of a large contract with the major supermarkets saw David and his partner, Charmaine, introducing about 1.2ha of hydroponics on the property. Charmaine's father was a district pioneer of the water-based growing medium and Charmaine brought a lot of her father's knowledge with her when she married David.

"Hydroponic farming is easier than traditional farming for growing a lot of the leafy vegetables," said David. "The plants are more productive, you don't need to rest and fertilise the soil, you can pick and plant on the same day."

Unfortunately, negotiations with the supermarkets fell through and David was left with the worry of how to market his produce. He opened a direct-to-the-public store on his property about three years ago.

"We had to do something to move out product," he explained.

David stocks the store with produce from his own farm and that from his brothers' farms, but also brings up stock from the Sydney market.

"I travel down to the Sydney market every day. I can take down a truckload of my own product to sell, and bring back whatever we are short of, or don't grow ourselves," he said.

In addition to supplying his store and the Sydney market, David supplies a number of local fruit stores and restaurants.

The nature of his market and product means that the farm is harvesting every day. Besides David and Charmaine, two full-time and two part-time workers are employed on the property.

“We are getting about 100 people through the store each day, so there is always work to do,” he said.



The region experiences warm summers (18C to 42C) and cool winters (-4C to 25C) and averages about 800mm of rain a year. The property has water rights to take 45 megalitres from the Hawkesbury River.

He said water use efficiency in the hydroponic system is better than that in conventional farming.

“The only water used is that taken up by the plant,” said David. “There is much less wastage than in normal farming. But our hydroponics system is only suitable for the lettuces and Asian vegetables, so we can’t use it over the entire farm.”

The soil on the property is a sandy loam. Soil testing is undertaken every two or three years and soil acidity is measured yearly. The soil is fertilised with manure from a local poultry farm, dolomite and lime, to control acidity which averages between 5.5 and 7.5 and add nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium to the soil.

Slow-release forms of fertiliser are applied to avoid run-off and holding ponds are used to catch water which is then recycled back onto the farm.

“Farmers are doing more of the sales and marketing themselves,” he said. “They can give the direct buyer a cheaper price, while getting a better price for themselves.

“Farmers also seem to be less competitive and secretive and more willing to help each other out with problems.”

He has learned a lot from other farmers and his family, and a major lesson was not to try to cut corners to save money.

“A dollar saved in one place usually ends up costing more down the track when you have to fix a problem that was not apparent at the time the decision was made,” he said. “It is important to take pride in your work, and do your best to make the best product you can.”

The importance of the customer to the success of the business is something which has helped shape David’s business philosophy: “If you treat a customer with respect, offer them a unique experience and provide them with good service and quality produce, they will always come back ..... And they do”.