

MEET THE MAKER

Green's shoots appear

Pictures: Wayne Harrington

ANOTHER bumper asparagus season is drawing to a close on the South Coast. Southerly spoke to Mount Serenity growers Jason Green and his parents Mike and Paula about their flourishing enterprise.

Southerly Magazine: How did cattle farmers manage to branch out into asparagus?

Jason Green: We started picking for pioneering asparagus growers - the Marshalls - many years ago. Mum more so than me. She picked for them since about 1981. So we were already experienced, so maybe that should have warned us off growing asparagus, because it's not for the feint-hearted.

SM: Why not?

JG: It can be hard work. You spend a lot of time with your bum in the air and you don't get to stand up straight very often. We've always understood what it must be like to pick strawberries because we're not too far away from that. But we're only small farmers and you have to diversify, I think.

SM: You must have liked a lot of what you saw when you were working for Marshalls?

JG: From my perspective, I liked the model that Marshalls had because they had a bit of everything. They were cattle farmers as well when they emigrated. They didn't have all their eggs in one basket.

Mike Green: A lot of credit should go to Marshalls for firing up this whole industry.

SM: Jason, how did it all begin for you personally?

JG: I had the opportunity to take on the lease for Andrew Marshall's place after he passed away. I did that for about four years and kept his legacy going from the horticultural side of things. That was good for me because it taught me a few things that I needed to know. It was a going concern, which was good because there's nothing worse when you start up because it costs a lot of money and you're not

making any for the first couple of years.

SM: How long does it take to get asparagus producing?

JG: It's a long-term thing because it's three years really before you start to make any money. So we were leasing, and obviously that costs money, so the family said "Why don't we do it here?" We dived straight into that and planted

about one hectare in one go. That was in about 2011.

SM: Did that go smoothly?

JG: We did everything back-to-front to be honest. We planted them and then didn't have enough water for them. We continued to do that for the next seven years, but we're up and ready to rock and roll now. We've really only

just started out. Mosterts and Marshalls have been in it for a lot longer. We're only little, and I like that. It's about quality not quantity.

SM: Do you intend to stay little?

JG: I think so. The problem is that to stay operational, you need to employ people because it's so labour-intensive. I can't keep going forever



■ Jason Green's asparagus-growing operations at Mount Serenity Holdings between Albany and Denmark have reached maturity after a lot of hard work by all members of the family.



■ The asparagus plants reach surprising heights when left to grow naturally and “recharge their batteries” after the end of the picking season.

when the workforce is a 73-year-old and a 69-year-old. They're getting sick of it.

Paula Green: We're wearing out slowly.

JG: Slave labour we call it. Every year we add a nought to their wages and they keep going, reluctantly.

PG: The silly things you do for your kids. But we don't mind doing it. It gives us a reason to get out of bed in the morning. It keeps us busy.

JG: But the cost of wages is scary because those costs go up and up each year but the prices we get don't tend to go up with them.

SM: What does the Green family look like?

JG: Mum and Dad own the farm. I'm just squatting. And then there's five kids. Four girls and one boy. They range from primary school teachers, vet nurses and aged care workers down to two in high school. Some have been excellent asparagus pickers and some haven't. That will become apparent with what's left of the Will!

SM: Are there any plans to expand your retail presence?

JG: We'd like to step into the Farmers Market at some point because there is some scope for that - and not just with asparagus. We like farmgate sales which is a good cottage industry. We'd like to do a bit more with that - even to get a little country kitchen licence and do pickled asparagus and things like that to help value-add when you're not getting good prices for it.

SM: Will that take the troughs out of the annual cashflow?

JG: It has the potential to do that, but it is a model we'd need to test. Like all things, it will take time. You can't just come in with a product and expect it to be super-popular. People need to get a taste for things. And it's about getting a good, strong client base. We're starting to develop regulars, which is good. We work very hard to make sure it looks good.

SM: So the crop is still all hand-picked?

JG: That's right. You can get machine-pickers, but they are expensive and look to be quite hard on the plant.

SM: Where does most of your produce end up?

JG: Most of it goes to Canning Vale. We sell to Aveg in Albany and Denmark BP does a good little trade. We are quite deliberate in not trying to go into markets that other people are in. We don't have a distribution problem because we don't produce huge amounts.

SM: What is your total acreage now?

JG: We've gone to a bit over three hectares and that is well and truly enough because it yields well.

SM: Asparagus is quite interesting in terms of its annual lifecycle isn't it?

JG: The best way to describe it is that it is mostly grown underground as a crown which looks like a big chunk of ginger. From that it grows spears which - if you let it go - grows into fern. Timing and presentation of the spear is the key. Otherwise, it's almost bullet-proof. Hail is our biggest scourge but we only lose our crop for four of five days and

it keeps coming. You could have a tsunami and it would be back growing in three days.

SM: What is an average yield?

JG: We would generally yield about five tonne to the hectare. And you get varying sizes. The plant will produce about 40 spears per season. They don't all come up at the same time. It is spread out over a period of time and the spears get a little bit skinny as the crown gets a bit tired.

SM: From an agronomy point of view, what do you do to help it along?

JG: We fertilise at the end of the season. My policy is not to keep flogging it and pushing it to the end. Last year we stopped early because we'd had enough. I'm not sure if the plants had, but we were tired. I think if you look after it, the plant's life is about 15 years, but you hear stories of 20 and 30 years.

SM: What varieties do you have?

JG: We only stick to 157 which is pretty common because it gives a good, medium-sized spear.

SM: Mount Serenity Holdings seems like a curious name for a fairly flat piece of country.

JG: There is no mount. I've got five kids, so there is no serenity. I don't own any land so there's no holdings either.

SM: For all that, you must enjoy what you do.

JG: I do. It's more lifestyle than anything. You'd be a fool to say you'll make a million dollars, but I didn't do it for that. **S**