



Tui and John Neill, Neill Island Farms, organic avocados.

NEILL ISLAND FARMS

Tui and John Neill own and manage a sixty acre organic avocado orchard on Matakana Island in the Western Bay of Plenty. Largely covered by pine plantations, Matakana Island forms a natural barrier between the harbour and the Pacific Ocean. In addition to forestry, the island is home to dairy farms, kiwifruit and the Neill's avocado orchard, which has seven hundred metres of beach frontage on the island's sheltered side.

Neill Farms grows seven different cultivars of avocados, mainly to extend the harvest season, which now spans almost the full year and produces an average of 700 bins – or around 200 tonnes – annually. About fifty percent of this is exported, with the remainder distributed on the local market.

John and Tui have a long history in providing safe and healthy food. They ran a poultry farm in Northland for twenty-five years before purchasing the property at Matakana Island during the late 1970s. They realised at the time that to have a reasonable standard of living during retirement, they had to do something that would create an annual return, and John was keen on establishing an avocado orchard.

The orchard is currently in its first year of organic conversion through AsureQuality. However the Neills have been limiting the amount of chemicals used on their orchard for many years. When asked why it took them so long to seek independent verification of their organic practices, "The market demanded certification" says John.

John expresses concern over conventional fertilisers, which he says increase production at the detriment of nutritional value. He is also concerned about the cumulative effect of chemical sprays; especially as he believes it may take several generations before the full effects may be known. "There is still so much we don't know, but we are trying to get healthier plants to produce healthy fruit" states John.

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Tui and John Neill.

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The main challenge of organic certification, according to the Neills, is the record keeping and associated bookwork which is required. "Everything we do has to be recorded" says John. The other challenge is that you have to change the whole focus of how you manage the orchard.

Now they are using an organic management regime they have moved away from copper sprays. "Our fruit's appearance is now cleaner", says Tui. According to John, the avocado tree in its natural environment grows underneath the canopy of taller subtropical trees, and had to fight off fungus naturally. He says copper sprays affect the plant's ability to carry this out effectively. They also use high calcium fertiliser and mulch from nearby sawmills, with the calcium assisting in nutrient uptake and mulch in providing a carbon source. The trees are not irrigated. "The trees will go looking for the water, growing better root systems, which in turn make for stronger more tolerant trees" says John. They still have some issues with thrip and leafroller, and use a biological control agent to manage these.

A major unexpected benefit of their organic regime appears to be the moving away from a bi-annual harvest to an annual harvest - with obvious economic effects. Another improvement is that shelf life has been gradually increasing as their inputs of synthetic nitrogen were reduced.

When asked about the potential for organic market opportunities, they immediately suggest that government should encourage producers to think about organics. Having no fear of what increased competition could mean for their market, they believe more organic growers would benefit the country as a whole.

When asked what makes them successful organic growers they answer; "Most people accept life as it is, some people challenge life as it is. You've got to challenge everything and find out the reason why things are happening."

The Neills have found it necessary to plant thorny rose bushes in their windbreaks to stop thieves stealing their delicious, high quality, organic avocados - an unfortunate testament to their success.

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The view over Neill Island Farms.

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