



Neil and John Trebilco, Trebilco Orchards, 2.7 canopy hectares of organic kiwifruit.

TREBILCO ORCHARDS

The Trebilcos' orchard has 13.5 canopy hectares in kiwifruit, of which 2.7 canopy hectares are fully certified organic. Brothers Neil and John Trebilco bought the property in early 1995, and in 1999 purchased an adjacent orchard which was undergoing transition to organics. This property achieved full BioGro organic certification in 2000.

The Trebilco brothers' kiwifruit is grown on Katikati sandy-loam soil, with seven blocks divided and surrounded by tall windbreaks. The orchard's management team is in the unique situation where they can directly compare conventionally grown and organic kiwifruit next to each other, and have also diversified to produce green, gold and organic green kiwifruit.

Neil explains that organic kiwifruit makes up 3.4% of the total amount of kiwifruit produced for Zespri, who export their entire class 1 organic crop.

Rigorous organic certification meets the needs of international markets, with both Neil and Glenn liking the organic philosophy of running the orchard as naturally as possible. The brothers have a second block undergoing organic certification, expanding their organically grown kiwifruit to meet what they see as an increasing demand.

Early improvements the Trebilcos undertook included changing the male vines to more modern cultivars, which are stronger and better pollinators, and changing the canopy from a t-bar style to a pergola type structure.

Growing conventionally and organically on adjacent blocks does pose several challenges, including pest and disease management and parallel production issues. Glenn explains that conventional growing can be reactive, whereas organics is more proactive. One of the more interesting effects of this, he says, is that a proactive management regime requires closer and more frequent observations on their organic blocks. This, in turn, has helped him look at their conventionally managed blocks differently, and led to the transfer of some techniques between the two blocks.

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Neil Trebilco and orchard manager Glen Roberts, underneath their organic kiwifruit canopy

ORGANIC KIWIFRUIT MAKES UP 3.4% OF THE TOTAL AMOUNT OF KIWIFRUIT PRODUCED FOR ZESPRI.

When asked about their main challenges in converting to organics, Neil mentions the more hands-on management, compliance and record keeping. “But the rewards are worth it”, says Neil. “Rewards are not necessarily financial, but the orchard has to be economically viable, and we need to look at it from a longer term perspective”.

Controlling passion vine hopper and scale are a challenge in the orchard and whereas targeted sprays can be used under the conventional system, organic management includes removing the plants which host pests.

Particular attention is placed on detail. “More precision is required and timing is crucial” explains Neil. Orchard manager Glenn Roberts tries to get everything done at the optimal time, from fertility and pruning – ensuring the correct number of buds per square meter of canopy – to harvesting. There are limited opportunities to act, as there are not as many management tools available. “If you are doing well conventionally, don’t necessarily expect organics to go well”.

“We don’t get everything right. It is hard to do organics well”, says Neil. Their management system includes a holistic approach – including maintaining good relationships with neighbours, employing local people, and training their staff.

A particular challenge on the organic block is not using Hi-Cane spray, which ensures a synchronised flowering between male and female vines. They have found that they are able to produce in an economically viable manner without the use of Hi-Cane, however, and Neil says “We are comparing good with excellent”.

Parallel production issues present another challenge in the management of the orchard where separation of the organic and conventional sections are of the utmost importance. This extends from training of pickers and pruners to having dedicated machinery for each of their blocks.

The team are proud of their work, with Glen saying “Just because we’re organic it doesn’t mean we have to be untidy. Organic growing requires persistence and passion. We get pleasure out of watching healthy fruit grow. It forms part of my job satisfaction.”

It is easy to see Neil, John and Glenn are passionate about their kiwifruit and the way they manage the orchard. Their success is proven with Glenn and the Trebilcos winning both the Hill Laboratory Harvest Award and the Zespri Kiwifruit Orchard Award in 2008.

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