



# AN EMPIRE BUILT ON LEEKES

by STEPHEN COOKE

**M**EMBERS of the Schreurs family talk enthusiastically about all aspects of their vegetable business but it's the mention of the ABC program *Gardening Australia* with Peter Cundall that really sets their eyes ablaze.

"The way he treats his vegie patch is what we do but on a bigger scale," Mark Schreurs says.

"He makes a lot of sense," says his brother, Darren.

Mark, Darren, their brother Paul and father Peter have created a successful vegetable business based on a policy of sustainability.

This policy incorporates the methods of biodiversity, efficient water use and soil protection that Peter Cundall uses in his garden but on a much larger scale.

Without it, they say they would not be able to continue farming, let alone expand to the extent they have, growing 8 million leeks and 5 million cos lettuce each year.

Peter started his farming career in 1964 growing celery but switched to leeks when Mark joined the family operation in 1983.

Peter had developed connections in the leeks trade so with Mark's help decided to grow the intensive crop.

"It was nothing to do with price," Peter said.

"Having an outlet for your produce is most important."

With Darren and then Paul joining the business, Peter purchased the current 160 hectare property east of Cranbourne in 1990.

"The original property was not big enough and this one was too large when we bought it," Peter said.

"It turns out it wasn't too large at all. We're now utilising almost all of it with only one block left to set up."

The Schreurs now sell leeks to 20 different outlets through agents in every state and are the main exporter of leeks to Japan, exporting about 6-8 tonnes each week, or 10 per cent of their weekly production.

Like most large operations, their success is based on a lot of hard work. The move to the new property in 1990 coincided with a crash in vegetable prices. They also had to work out what crops and varieties best suited their new farm.

"Our crops weren't so good in the beginning because we were learning what was best with the new property," Peter said.

"We had to learn a lot and we did. We knuckled down."

They had to knuckle down for six years until 1996, when Peter said they finally got on their feet. On top of their levels of production, they process and pack all their vegeta-



Export leeks bound for Japan.

bles on farm and employ up to 50 people.

"To survive in this industry is a real challenge so we looked at best practice and realised best practice was effectively sustainability, so we developed a sustainability policy," Peter said.

This policy is the centrepiece of their operation.

"You have to take control of the things you can," Mark said. "We can't control the markets but a successful farm has consistently high yields."

"You have to look at yields in future crops as well and make decisions for the long-term."

"A sustainability policy is not just good for the environment but good for the bank balance as well."

The Schreurs say their saving grace was getting involved with a

recycled water scheme in the late 90s.

It took two years to have it approved and now 52 producers receive recycled water from the local treatment plant.

They also have a reticulated system running throughout the farm to recycle all water caught on farm.

Surface water and treated recycled water from the processing/packing shed fills a 400 megalitre dam while a separate 12 megalitre dam is used for the recycled water from the treatment plant.

The fixed overhead irrigation system is fully computerised with a base station communicating with

Right: Peter Schreurs accepts his award, while paying tribute to the work of "my boys" at the awards dinner in Perth.

Meet the Schreurs boys, from left: Mark, Peter, Paul and Darren Schreurs in a leek crop.

remote controllers in the paddocks.

Pumps have been upgraded from fixed motors to variable speed motors, which keeps the pressure constant and is more efficient.

Leeks remain the primary crop and are grown all year, with Paul selecting and testing new varieties and keeping on top of the latest trends from Holland.

They plant a mixture of processing and fresh varieties but the primary focus remains on high yields.

"In the old days you used to get more for something special but now we concentrate on getting as much per hectare on farm as we can," Mark said.

The amount grown is used to benchmark performance, with the bar raised higher each year.

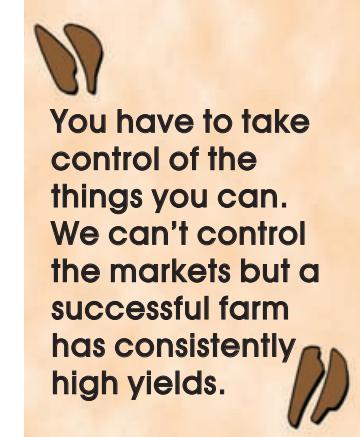
Darren manages crop maintenance and first implemented an integrated pest management (IPM) system eight years ago.

"Since we started it, we have not used insecticide in that time and have only applied fungicide after major storms," Darren said.

"We are close to organic and only use biological chemicals, including Success and Proclaim."

Darren is constantly scrutinising paddocks so affected paddocks receive an application if necessary.

Part of the IPM program involves planting native flowering trees that harbour birds and beneficial insects and each 8 hectare block is surrounded by corridors that have



been planted to trees.

The Schreurs choose the rotation of their crops to prevent potential disease problems. They get a soil test only every three years, preferring to judge the health of the soil on the quality of the crop grown.

As leeks are their main variety of vegetable, other vegetables are chosen to suit the crop rotation.

"Every crop we grow has to be from a different family so the soil gets a rest. All waste is ploughed back in."

They started planting Cos lettuce four years ago and now grow 5 million a year because of market demand. Cos has overtaken parsnips as the second crop.

About 20 hectares of parsnips are grown and Baby Womboks (Chinese cabbage) have also been introduced.

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