



# JADE GARDEN: ON SURVIVING A YEAR OF CHANGE

Words by Heather Woods



**In November 2019, Jade Garden was thrown a curve ball when a fast-moving hailstorm swept through the Selwyn region and almost wiped them and many others out.**

They recovered from that, and soon found an issue with grass grubs they hadn't accounted for on a new farm which required further technical management. And of course, there was also a very long, dry summer that challenged their water management abilities during a time when there was a lot of talk of 'new innovation' set to be imposed for the greater good.

Then Covid-19 hit, and as the world came to grips with the reality of what a pandemic meant, the crops kept growing and the workers kept harvesting, tending to their vegetables. The enforced restrictions and stoppages that affected so many, didn't have any major impact on Jade Garden at all. In fact, it was essentially business as usual.

Owner Allen Lim, a director of Vegetables New Zealand, has been in the water management space for a long time and shared his perspective as a local grower, and the industry implications at a national level. He highlighted that what's evident now more than ever, is that growers need the industry regulations to work for them - not against them.

## **Concerns over industry regulations**

Growers are facing huge challenges - and not just with growing produce. Unreasonable regulations being

*Allen Lim uses good management practice to look after the land*

imposed on growers by some regional councils are adding huge overhead costs that are difficult to recover, and smaller growers won't have the capital behind them to soak that up. Allen's message: "Listen to the growers. Many aren't happy."

For example, Overseer modelling is promoted as a sustainable way for farmers to predict yield, a way to protect the environment, and helpful for creating future-proof best practices. And for some growers - like growers of onions, squash, peas, and potatoes - it can be a realistic option. But others in the horticulture family don't quite see the same benefits.

When you take a close look at how their crops are grown and harvested, it's not a case of setting a target growing number and committing to it. Sometimes a crop suffers from uneven germination, other times from weather events or disease, and so parts of it aren't of a saleable quality. Others parts grow as planned - it's this produce that is picked at optimum size (and not necessarily at maturity) for the best texture and taste.

It's what's left behind that creates patches of crop residue. That residue forms part of the fertiliser requirement for the next crop and this 'patchiness' means you can't predict how the next crop will fare. So using Overseer modelling to generate an estimate or average of a full crop isn't effective for distinguishing between target yield and marketable yield.

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## Unreasonable regulations being imposed on growers by some regional councils are adding huge overhead costs that are difficult to recover

As a contrast, Allen says Environment Canterbury have met with him numerous times in the past, and they understand the challenge he and other growers are facing; they've been reasonable about managing it within their framework, but Jade Garden was forced to cap the growing area because of the Resource Management Act (RMA) requirement to "maintain or improve" water quality. What's really needed is a separate National Environmental Standard for vegetable growing, Allen says.

### Penalised for good land management

Growers like Allen take the time to look after their land using good management practice. Instead of just rotating crop after crop, they give the land a chance to recover and use cover crops, or mop up crops, to bring the lost nutrients back to the surface and increase organic matter in the soils. It's a key responsibility when it comes to protecting the land, keeping it fertile and at the same time looking after the environment and the people.

Being environmentally conscious like this effectively reduces the total land size they can grow on, and for not using all their available land for growing, they are penalised. The RMA says that the water quality must be "maintained or improved" in the absence of a reliable Overseer number for nitrogen leaching, so the regional authorities choose to limit the growing area without understanding how the land is being worked by each individual grower. They deem land that's currently in recovery mode as part of their total growing land, even though there's not a single vegetable being grown on it.

### Creating opportunity from a pandemic

During the early days of the lockdown, wholesalers weren't ordering because the independent retailers were closed, but Allen's produce was simply redirected into supermarkets who were increasing their orders; products like spring onions, silverbeet, leeks, and bok choy. Without the worry of disaster management, Allen set about some project work he otherwise wouldn't have had time for and took time to consider the bigger picture against the backdrop of regulations.

As far as the progression of horticulture, he understands the need for environmental gains, but it also has to be economically viable. And he agrees that investment in the industry is needed, but the money must be spent in the right places to truly help advance the industry. Growers need to see a clear benefit. ●



# SOME LIKE IT GREEN

### Nikko Green

75-90 day maturity based on region and season. 3-3.5kg. Flexible harvest window of Summer, Autumn and early Winter. Head is held well clear of ground.

### Samurai

Ideally suited to harvest from late Spring to late Autumn. Great internal colour and quality, averaging 2-3 kg. High resistance to Clubroot.

### Yokozuna

70-80 day maturity based on region and season. Medium size 3-3.5kg, vigorous plant with good density. Very good field holding and market suitability.

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