

## Down-to-earth technology giving high-tech solutions.



A few months of relief milking helped cement Maketu orchard manager Matt Ryan's preference for kiwifruit over cows.

"Kiwifruit can be intensive but you can walk away from the vines if you need a weekend off and they won't dry off," the Direct Management Services (DMS) employee says.

After finishing high school, Matt spent a year test-driving agricultural and horticultural jobs before enrolling in Massey University's bachelor of applied science programme. He graduated with an honours degree and a double major in horticulture and agri-business and currently manages 65ha of orchards in the Maketu area.

He is particularly interested in the use of technology and innovation in orchards. He has built a time-lapse camera that can record an entire kiwifruit growth season, then compress months' worth of observation into a few minutes of footage. "With kiwifruit, so much is about observation and it's amazing what you can see from this footage. All this from a camera, some PVC pipe and a car battery."

## Q & A

### **KFJ: How did you come into this industry?**

MR: "I grew up in town, in Tauranga, but my dad is an agri-business consultant and I always knew I was going to work outdoors. After trying dairy farming, I found a job picking avocados with a grower who was keen to teach me a few things and that got me excited about

horticulture. Then I followed on into the Apata packhouse.

I really enjoyed the work but realised I needed good qualifications if I was going to get a permanent, year-round position. While studying, I was selected to work on a Zespri research project that really strengthened my interest in kiwifruit and the business management side of the industry. I thought, this is really what I want to do."

### **KFJ: What has been the biggest aid to you in getting started in the industry?**

MR: "I had my job interview with DMS at the same time Psa was found. It was a terrible thing for the industry but I'd say it was a good thing for my career.

Everyone was starting with zero knowledge of this disease so it was a level playing field. I had no direct experience in the kiwifruit industry but I'd come straight out of learning and finding information and solving problems. It was a great opportunity for me to learn but also to show what I could do.

When I started with DMS, I was given the opportunity to experience different areas of the business; from harvest/post harvest management, right through to on-orchard production management. It was the orchard management stuff that really interested me and, five years down the track, I'm managing one main 50ha orchard and four smaller ones.

### **KFJ: What does the future look like for you and the industry?**

MR: I've been a manager two or three years, learning how things work. Now, I feel I'm at the stage where I can really start to ramp up and get onto some high performance goals for clients. I also want to apply that to my own orchard. I'd look at orchard leasing as a stepping stone and hope to be looking at orchard ownership in the next five years or so. I think there's a pretty bright future for the kiwifruit industry. We're going through a fairly buoyant stage and now that we are starting to get our heads around Psa I think we're going to start refining and improving on how we're growing.

### **KFJ: What influence do young people have in the industry?**

MR: There's no barrier to young people in this industry, unlike some others. Most people will give you a fair chop. We're going into this phase where orchard owners are stepping back and either selling or handing over to management companies. When I started five years ago, I was one of the first graduates in the team. Now, more than half of the management team share the same background and are in that 30-year-old age group. We can bounce a lot of ideas off each other and that's balanced with older guys who have all the experience.