

Transforming the Kiwifruit Industry

Russell Lowe is a member of the Te Puke/Mount Maunganui parish. An esteemed scientist and NZ kiwifruit breeder, last year saw him receive many awards for his distinguished career.

In June, the Royal NZ Institute of Horticulture (RNZIH) presented Russell with the 2020 Plant Raisers' Award in recognition of his work in breeding Zespri™ SunGold™ kiwifruit.

In September, he was awarded the 2020 Kiwifruit Innovation Award for his contribution to breeding the first commercialized red kiwifruit cultivar. And in December, at the Science NZ Awards for Plant and Food Research Scientists, he was recognized with a lifetime achievement award. Russell, now retired, has spent a 50-year career involved in work that has transformed the kiwifruit industry.

As a student doing a Bachelor of Science degree at the University of Canterbury, Russell Lowe worked at an orchard in the Horotane Valley to support his studies. That work gave him a

great appreciation of horticulture. In 1969, he took on a position as a technician on a research orchard in Nelson.

Three years later he was offered a new role as "officer in charge of the orchard" for a 60-acre block of land in Te Puke. The small rural town in the Bay of Plenty has a marketing tagline that says, Goodness Grows Here and is widely regarded as the kiwifruit capital of NZ. It was different in the early 1970s. "The 60-acre block of land was a blank canvas with an orchard house and a pile of posts. At the time kiwi was not a major crop. Citrus and sub tropicals - avocados, feijoas, figs and stone fruit - were all being looked at," Russell says. He started setting up the orchard and putting in kiwifruit blocks. Some of the blocks originally planted are still in production.

In 1987 Russell, his wife Veronica and three children, moved off the orchard to a property in town. "Being on the orchard there is always something to do. I needed a break." Russell still lives on the property, surrounded by an impressive garden planted with apples, figs and roses. "One fifth of an acre is enough for me to look after," he says.



Russell Lowe has made an outstanding contribution to horticulture in New Zealand.

At the age of 65, Russell stepped down to a half-time role at the Crown Research Institute: Plant and Food Research, and 12 years on, officially retired in 2020, just a year after the red kiwifruit cultivar was commercialised. He first started working on developing a red kiwi in 1993. Russell says, "It is difficult to let go. We do crosses with breeds every year but you don't see fruit for two or three years, so I am always interested in what is coming up next."

Russell's wife Veronica died in 2012. An avid gardener with a special interest in roses, she was a National Rose Society judge and a keen grower of roses. Both Veronica and Russell have had

a long involvement with their local Methodist Church. Russell is currently on the property committee and plays the organ for services each month. He admits he is still keeping busy with Plant and Food and is an Honorary Fellow. During Covid lockdown work continued via Zoom meetings.

In presenting the RNZIH award to Russell last year, Zespri Chairman and awards judge Bruce Cameron said Russell "epitomized innovation within the industry, not just with his work on developing the red cultivar but also for his contribution to selecting gold varieties of kiwifruit that have

proven exceptionally popular with consumers all around the world."

Last year, NZ orchards produced a record number of 74 million trays of kiwifruit. Given that the fruit is now available in green, gold and red, the appeal is likely to continue to grow, especially in the Asian market where red is perceived to be a lucky colour and the sweet flesh is popular.

Perhaps surprisingly, given his life-long association with kiwifruit, Russell admits he still "certainly does" eat the fruit. "I help out with assessment and taste tests to meet protocols. I am careful that I don't eat too many in a day."

C A R I N G F O R O U R P E O P L E

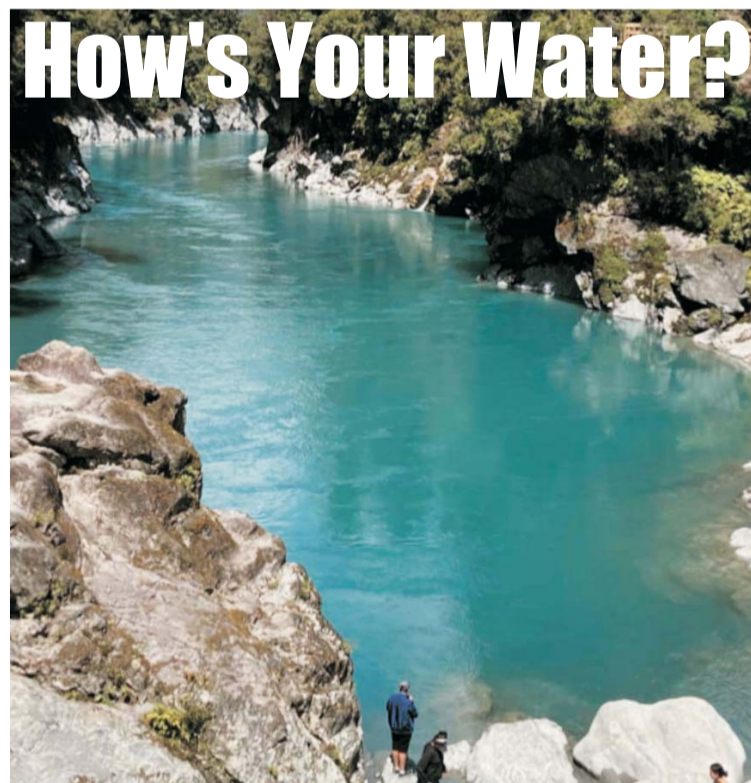
Trudy Downes

This Christmas I delighted in taking time to tour regions of New Zealand and always parking near water. It was beautiful and a prod against complacency.

Many spots we visited were wonderful as always (Gisborne beach, Tokomaru Bay and Hokitika Gorge to name a few), and yet other waters were overrun with water weed or had toxic algae warnings posted beside them.

I couldn't see the Dancing Sands at Waikoropupū Springs (Takaka, South Island) due to the overgrowth of water weed. When once I wanted to jump into the pure clean water, now I don't even want to dip my toes. Yet it is still known for its clarity and freshness. (Jumping into or dipping your toes in Waikoropupū are prohibited activities which I did not do).

The Pakuratahi River at Kaitoke Regional Park (also known as Rivendell from the *Lord of the Rings* movies) has algae warnings and when we got up in the morning another camper's



Hokitika Gorge, January 2021. Gorgeous!

rubbish was left at our front door. Not even the cat wanted to go outside!

It has been 20 years between visits to these places, but I have been wondering... have we been resting on our past glories thinking that because something is wonderful that it will stay that way without effort? Memories

are better than reality? That last year's victories are the way forward for this year and beyond?

It is this thought of resting on past glories that has me most concerned. We have been so busy coping with last year that our victory celebrations are part of our coping mechanisms to

keep us going. But in celebrating our recent victories are we going to use them as an excuse to stop striving for further improvements? Do we feel that because we have done so well, we don't need to strive further?

2020 gave us new experiences: Zoom meetings, mask wearing and lockdown to name a few, but the previous year also had some big lessons for us. Measles outbreaks, shootings, a gas explosion and a volcanic eruption, all of whose lessons continued into 2020. Has 2019 been dwarfed by 2020?

At the end of 2020 WorkSafe concluded their prosecution of the gasfitter and his company that were involved in the 2019 gas explosion. WorkSafe also started their prosecutions of companies and individuals in relation to the fatalities and injuries from the 2019 volcanic eruption at Whakaari.

All these prosecutions relate to having processes in place that are relevant to the risks of the activities, and then carrying out those processes to keep people safe.

Say what you'll do, do what you say.

I don't think the Church is yet in a position of being able to say

what it will do to keep people safe at all its activities. Perhaps we have been resting on past glories of wellness and victories of surviving the first round of Covid-19. We have reduced the severity of some incidents by saying, "Nobody was hurt, they're OK now," or perhaps by not even talking about the incidents.

This year I plan on confronting complacencies and I am looking forward to bringing together all those things that we should be doing. The focus will be on Covid-19 and beyond, incorporating all of the old lessons and getting ready for new lessons.

I don't consider this to be a New Year's resolution. I consider this to be like jumping waves at the beach. You look at each wave with anticipation, sometimes standing on tip toe works, sometimes you turn your back and jump, and other times you get a face full of salt water. All options are learning experiences and mostly great fun!

We can't celebrate the clarity of Waikoropupū Springs if our other waters become unusable.

Ko au te awa, ko te awa ko au. I am the river, the river is me.