

Farmgate opens new market

Published at themercury.com.au

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October 21, 2009 12:28am

THE preponderance of farmers markets in Tasmania was one of the factors in a WA couple's move here.

George said he and wife Hilary were "going with the strength" because most of their five adult children and 12 grandchildren had moved east.

After three years of drought in WA, a reasonable rainfall was also attractive, as was the price of land here compared with in Victoria. And all the farmers markets listed on the internet sealed the deal.

Having bought 9ha at Saltwater on the Tasman Peninsula, they moved in last December, but were soon dashed to find the "farmers markets" were infrequent and often more about trash and treasure than fresh produce. Their previous experience had been at the [Albany Farmers Market](#) in WA, winner last year of the Vogue Award for best farmers market.

"We would sell \$1000 worth of snow and sugar-snap peas in a morning, let alone the rest of the stuff," George said.

So, having set up poly houses for growing vegetables and fruit on a scale specifically for farmers markets, they were delighted to hear of Madi Peattie's Tasmanian Farm Gate market, which starts at 8am on Sunday October 25 in the Melville St carpark in Hobart, and will be held every Sunday.

The couple came to farming after their million-dollar printing business went down with the mining companies that fed it business. In the late 1980s, when their children were aged seven to 17, they bought 4ha and set up a market garden. Dirt-poor, George constructed a plough from a forked stick and bits salvaged from the tip. The whole family would get on a rope to haul it along the paddock.

"We did not do it when the school bus was going past, in deference to saving our teenage children's embarrassment," Hilary said.

Eventually their operation was getting to be big business, selling button squash, zucchini and tomatoes to supermarkets, and exporting broccoli and cauliflower to Asia. But they found they were enjoying it less than in the early days, so they switched to the farmers market.

"It was the best thing we ever did," George said. "There was no commission, little packaging, a 50km drive instead of 400km to market. If you are going to all the trouble of growing without the use of toxic sprays, grading it properly, and not having it four days in transit, if it has good keeping qualities and the flavour is good and you sell direct to the public, your business just explodes and you get the benefit."

"And it's just such fun," said Hilary, who was tired of seeing their well-grown vegetables mixed with indifferent produce in supermarkets.

Now they are ready to do it all again with their business Grown for Taste. Forget pea sprouts, Farm Gate shoppers will be the only ones able to buy the chefs' new favourite, pea tendrils -- sprouts that have grown beyond infancy to have a few tender leaves.

There are baby beetroot leaves that the health-conscious will like for their antioxidants, as will people "who just like their food to look beautiful", said Hilary. Little pots of watercress can be sat on the windowsill and picked off as you want it. There are micro greens -- tiny leaves of radish, tat soy and mizuna big enough only for a visual swirl or a subtle addition to a salad.

The Hartleys grow just about everything hydroponically -- a statement that can cause a gasp of dismay, but George points out that a hydroponic system can be as "organic" as any other. He makes up his own mix to feed to the plants, making sure it contains seaweed "and a range of organic stuff".

One of the several beauties of growing hydroponically is the fact that vegetables grow very quickly, which means they are tender and that pests have little time to catch on to the fact they are there and build up a critical mass. Pea tendrils take two weeks to grow, beans four to six weeks, and tomatoes are ready in three to four weeks.

Plus it is an extremely water-conservative way of growing. It takes 500 litres of water to grow 20 square metres of crops, virtually in perpetuity. The nutrients in the water supply need to be topped up once a week, but the water goes around and around, and the gutters in the roof supply all the water that's needed.

George also uses variations, such as aeroponics, the method for growing the pea tendrils. Their roots go under the polystyrene platform they grow on, hang in the air, and every so often are sprayed with water. "It's like a rainforest," George said.

He said research showed there were more beneficial micro flora and fauna in a hydroponic system than in most soils. As the system requires only a 50W pump that will run for 20 hours for 18 cents to grow 20 square metres, the "hi-tech result for a low-tech input" makes it an ideal system for the Third World and a focus of the Asian Vegetable Research and Development Centre.

In WA, the Hartleys trialled 200 varieties of tomatoes, from which they settled on four, which were selected for taste.

"Now we are in Tasmania, we have started all over again to see what grows best here, but at least we have got some favourites," Hilary said.

George allows all his tomatoes to grow only one truss. The plants grow only 30cm high, which allows the plant to capture all available light, and they ripen even in low-light conditions. George believes it is the best way to grow all tomatoes -- whether in the ground or a hydroponic system -- in Tasmania.

"The result of the plant putting all its energy into just one truss is they grow faster, keep better and are tastier," he said. George is also able to grow three or four crops a summer. The Hartleys' set-up prompted one of their sons to remark: "This is not a horticultural enterprise, this a hydroponics theme park."

And the produce from the theme park, such as salad greens, parsley, chives, coriander, chervil, mint, basil, oregano, sugar-snap peas and asian greens will be available only at the Tasmanian Farm Gate market.

Stallholders set for showdown

A LIST of Tasmanian farmer and community markets reveals that most in the south of the state are held on Sunday -- because you can't compete with Saturday's Salamanca Market.

It is difficult to compete even on a Sunday, not so much to attract customers, but because Salamanca draws on so many producers.

Tasmanian Farm Gate is a real farmers market -- items must be grown or made in Tasmania and the person who grew or made them must be at the market.

This cuts out farmers who prefer to pass their goods on to retailers, be they supermarkets or Salamanca. But because the farmers market is a new development in the south of the state, there are not many producers geared up yet for a weekly market.

So if the market is to thrive, shoppers need to support it while it builds up strength and attracts more stallholders.

About 20 stallholders will be at Sunday's first market from 8am to 1pm. As well as the Hartleys, Richmond Cherries and Valley Patch will sell fresh produce. Aurora Lamb and Rare Foods will sell meat products while Bruny Island and Grandvewe have cheese. The Companion Bakery and Woodbridge Smokehouse will be there and there will be stalls selling preserves, honey, olive products, plants and coffee.

If you are interested in setting up a stall contact Madi Peattie on 62345625 or madi@madevents.com.au.

Story from: http://www.themercury.com.au/article/2009/10/21/104695_food-wine.html