

# Avocentric: Rooted in innovation – Stephen Wade’s legacy

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Innovation takes root where resilience thrives – and **Stephen Wade’s** journey proves how both can transform a single orchard into an industry leader.



When Stephen Wade began working on his family’s land outside Whangārei in Northland, avocados were still considered a novelty in 1980s New Zealand. What followed was a 42-year journey that would shape not only Stephen’s career, but also the wider avocado industry.

Today, Stephen leads Lynwood Avocado Nursery – a dual enterprise that began with an avocado orchard and later expanded to include a specialist nursery. Together, these two arms of the business reflect a powerful combination of hands-on growing experience and advanced horticultural science. Stephen has become a respected voice in the

avocado industry – both at home and internationally – with a reputation for pioneering excellence in clonal rootstock production.

Lynwood is located on a 10-hectare property that has been farmed by the Wade family since 1941, spanning three generations. Set at 180 metres above sea level, the site is slightly more elevated than ideal for avocados, but makes up for this with rich volcanic soils and a sustainable, self-supplied water source. These natural advantages, combined with careful management, saw Stephen receive two Ballance Farm Environment Awards in 2017, recognising innovation and water stewardship.

Lynwood Avocado Nursery is widely regarded as one of the most technically advanced nurseries in New Zealand, particularly in the complex art of producing clonal rootstocks. Clonal rootstock production requires careful management of multiple delicate steps, from etiolation, to double grafting, through to robust tree development. It took more than a decade of research, trialling, and refinement before Stephen was ready to commercialise the process. That long-term investment has paid off: today, the nursery is considered a global leader in this niche but essential field. The nursery supplies growers across New Zealand and consults internationally





in countries such as Japan, Turkey, Egypt, Niue, China, Spain, and Vietnam – markets carefully selected for their opposite seasonality to New Zealand's, so they complement rather than compete with local fruit.

Alongside nursery operations, Stephen has expanded Lynwood's growing capacity through the development of a second orchard site at Te Kopuru, on the west coast of Northland outside of Dargaville. There, approximately 20 hectares of canopy – 12,000 trees – have been planted so far, with the goal of planting another 8,000 trees. This development is built around a high-density planting model, same as at the Whangārei orchard, with trees spaced three metres apart and pruned to remain below three metres in height.

"The goal is to produce high yields, high-quality fruit, and keep labour costs low," Stephen explains. Small trees can be picked from the ground, sprayed more effectively, and are less vulnerable to wind damage. It is also more economically sustainable in a high-wage country like New Zealand. "We are no longer a low-wage industry when compared globally. To compete, we have to be incredibly efficient."

The Te Kopuru orchard has already made an impact beyond Lynwood. Its development served as the catalyst for a major water storage scheme in the

region – an infrastructure project that will enable irrigation across 1,100 hectares of new horticultural land. Stephen's early commitment to the site helped trigger the initial \$36 million investment, which has since grown into a \$56 million scheme with pipelines through to Dargaville. It is a significant legacy, supporting not just Lynwood's operation, but also the future of Northland's growing community. The mid-sized dam near Dargaville follows the successful model established in Kerikeri, where investment in an irrigation scheme in the 1980s transformed the region into a horticultural and economic hub. This approach has the potential to be rolled out across New Zealand – especially when, as Stephen points out, "we only use around 2% of the water that falls on New Zealand, and that's a gift we need to use".

Lynwood propagates a wide range of rootstocks, including well-known performers such as Dusa, Bounty, Latas, Duke 7, and Zutano. Among these is Astro, a rootstock from a 'survivor' tree discovered at the base of Maungatapere Mountain in Northland. Stephen played a key role in its propagation, trials, and eventual commercialisation. Astro is now showing strong performance under New Zealand growing conditions, particularly in the Mid and Far North. As the only avocado rootstock discovered in New Zealand, it is now undergoing international trials and has the potential to become the country's first globally

significant avocado rootstock.

The main fruiting variety at Lynwood remains Hass, though the nursery grows a diverse range of cultivars for research, nursery support, and specialist orders. Fruit from the orchard is collected by a packhouse, which handles grading, packing, and export to around a dozen international markets.

"They manage the logistics and distribution," Stephen says. "We focus on growing the best fruit we can."

Producing that fruit, however, is becoming increasingly complex. While Lynwood's original orchard enjoyed two decades with minimal pest pressure, the emergence of six-spotted mites and other pests has changed the landscape.

"When a new pest appears, there is no registered chemistry to control it," Stephen explains. "It takes three to four years to understand the pest's life cycle and develop effective management strategies. It's chaotic at the start."

At both the nursery and orchard, pest control is based on regular monitoring, with pesticides used only when absolutely necessary. Biological controls are preferred where possible, for example, Encarsia parasitic wasps are used to manage whitefly in the greenhouses. However, recently mirids – an insect that likely damages avocado flowers – have been especially concerning.



“They are relatively new to being considered a pest and may be a factor in recent low yields. This coming flowering season, we’ll be monitoring closely and trialling some bee-friendly sprays.”

Navigating this evolving pest landscape requires constant vigilance, as does preparing for future demand. It is a lesson he has learnt the hard way. After a decade of buoyant demand, the avocado industry took a sharp downturn in the wake of Covid: the Australian hospitality industry was in lockdown; supply chains were disrupted; there was a series of extreme weather events; the New Zealand economy has been depressed; and interest rates have been high.

“It was like someone just hit the switch, and all this bad luck happened in a relatively short space of time,” says Stephen. “We used to have 60 nursery staff, and now we’re down to seven. This is the weakest I’ve ever seen the economy.”

Yet Stephen is pragmatic.

“Grower confidence is slowly returning. This season’s returns have been strong, but the industry needs a good season that is not Australia-dependent to really rebuild momentum.”

He is optimistic about future growth in Asia, where avocados remain relatively under-consumed.

“Half the world’s population lives in Asia, and they



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**"Staying connected with the avocado industry is crucial especially when it comes to anticipating trends."**

"We have to pick trends two to three years ahead of time," Stephen says. "It takes that long to produce a tree, so we cannot afford to wait for the orders to arrive – we need to be ready when they do."

Stephen has served as a board member of the New Zealand Avocado Growers' Association and as Chair of the Avocado Nursery Association. He remains actively involved in industry events and attends the World Avocado Congress – a four-yearly gathering of international experts.

"The Congress is invaluable. You learn what other countries are doing, where the science is heading, and how global trends are shifting."

He also encourages growers to attend local Field Days.

"It is easy to get insular. You think your orchard looks normal, but you have nothing to compare it to. Getting out to other properties gives you perspective and new ideas."

Diversification and innovation also play a role in resilience. Alongside its avocado production, Lynwood has begun growing

citrus trees – and, more notably, dragon fruit. For Stephen, dragon fruit echoes the early days of avocado growing in New Zealand in the eighties. "We don't really know what we're doing yet," he says.

"The information is a bit scant, so we're shooting in the dark a little, but there are three or four other growers at the same stage as us. Plus we have a lot more horticultural knowledge now, so we'll be making better decisions than we were making with avocados in the eighties."

Three varieties, developed in partnership between Plant & Food Research and Vietnam's SOFRI institute (Southern Horticultural Research Institute), are currently being trialled. Grown in pots indoors, the one-year-old dragon fruit plants have just yielded their first modest crop.

"MG Marketing thinks the New Zealand market could support 10 hectares. We are starting with a third of a hectare and seeing where it goes."

When asked what advice he would offer to someone entering the avocado industry today, Stephen does not hesitate.

"Learn as much as you can. Read, research, and talk to other growers. But most importantly, choose your site carefully. That is the single most important decision you will make – and you are making it when you know the least."

Soil, water, and climate remain the core considerations. From there, he says, focus on good orchard design, rootstock

selection, and efficient practices.

Despite the challenges of the past few years, Stephen remains passionate about the work. He credits much of his success to the people around him.

"Most of our staff have been here for years – some over 20. I don't have a hands-on operational role anymore. I give direction and let the team do what they are good at."

He visits Te Kopuru once a week and spends time planting native trees around a new house and wetland project on the property. The space also allows him to think clearly. "I do my best work when I have nothing to do," he says with a smile.

Looking to the future, Stephen is hopeful. "We are in a good position for the next wave of investment. The barriers to entry in clonal rootstock production are high, and we have a proven record." He is excited about the potential of the Te Kopuru orchard and the return of confidence in the industry. But when it comes to legacy, his perspective remains grounded.

"I think it is a decent legacy that three generations of our family have managed to survive and thrive on a relatively small piece of land," he says. It is not just the trees or the water schemes or the accolades. It is the sense of continuity, of growth through resilience and innovation, that defines Stephen's journey – and Lynwood's future. ●

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