Grower profile

John Hasan: Wandin, Victoria

STRAWBERRY INNOVATION

John Hasan is a second generation strawberry grower, whose family has been growing strawberries and other produce in Wandin since the 1930s. John is also the Chairman of the Victorian Strawberry Industry Development Committee (VSIDC), and involved in many other aspects of the industry. He and his wife Annette have grown strawberries on their farm for 26 years.

While not large growers, John and Annette grow a high quality product that finds its way to independent retail outlets and farmers markets, where their fruit commands premium prices. John attributes a lot of this success to his focus on the health and biology of his soil.

JOHN ASKS

'If you haven't got good soil, how can you grow good fruit?'

Over the years, John has worked with agronomists and industry to find new ways to improve soil health. John rests his soil, with a break of a year or more between crops, rotating with a green manure crop, such as Italian ryegrass. The benefits of this practice include returning organic material back to the soil, replacing the nutrients removed by the strawberry crop, and helping to break the life cycle of disease-causing organisms in the soil.

An innovative approach that John has taken to increasing his soil health is to use regular applications of soil additives that contain beneficial microorganisms (bacteria and fungi). Fumigation of the soil destroys disease-causing microorganisms, but it can also kill the beneficial fungi and bacteria, that play important roles in forming good soil. The application of beneficial microorganisms improve soil structure, and hence water-holding capacity, improve drainage and air movement in the soil, and break down organic material in the soil to release nutrients and produce humus.

In addition, beneficial microorganisms in the soil can protect the plant's root system against disease-causing organisms in the soil, much in the way that beneficial insects used in an IPM program work.

Even in the first year of using biological soil additives, John saw a difference in the health of his plants, and by the second year he saw a "massive" improvement in plant health and fruit yield. The plants also suffered less from stress in the hot weather last summer.

John and Annette

JOHN BELIEVES THAT

In the same way transitioning to using IPM to control insect pests in the crop is not immediate, using beneficial microorganisms is not an instant fix, as it takes time return the soil to health.

Some patience is needed, but John has seen major improvements in plant health and fruit production with subsequent seasons.

As well as working to increase the biological health of his soil, John also has regular leaf analyses done to help determine

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the optimum inputs of fertilisers for his crop. This season, John will be working closely with an agronomist to really fine tune his fertilisation program.

USING THIS APPROACH

Of looking after his soil health and optimising fertiliser use, combined with a comprehensive IPM program, John believes he has more than halved his chemical use, and his use of pesticides has decreased by 85%.

While tying up useable land in rotation with green manure crops may appear to be detrimental to overall production, John disagrees. He says that even though he plants only half the plants he grew in the past, his fruit production is only down by 20%, because his healthier soil grows healthier and higher yielding plants. This coupled with the high quality of fruit commanding a price premium, means that John's business remains profitable.

With increasing pest and disease pressures in the industry, and increasing interest in producing clean, green food, John feels that looking after the soil, and decreasing chemical usage will become increasingly important in the future. While he acknowledges that the industry is changing, with an increase in the size of farms and amount of fruit produced, he feels there will still be room for smaller growers, but they will have to "do it better".

John's take home message – **"look after your soil, use IPM and grow quality fruit".**

John's farm

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