

Three sixty, with Geoff Thorpe Accentuate the positive



Last month, I described the storm of Armageddon proportions that has devastated the New Zealand grapevine nursery industry in recent years. Navigating through such conditions is not something any of us would choose to do for fun, and I'll be the first to admit that these past two years have been exhausting on many levels.

But this time around I want to reflect on some of the positive outcomes. Yes, at Riversun we're all still working our butts off to ride out the storm, but we're also constantly looking for ways to take vine quality to the next level while having some fun along the way.

I'm sure many of you seasoned entrepreneurs can bear witness to feeling nostalgia for the early days of your business when you were totally immersed in the very thick of it. I started Riversun in 1982, because I knew very early on that I loved growing plants. I built the entire operation at Riverside Road from scratch, pretty much single-handedly, including the original shade and poly houses, and the artificial shelters to protect the property. It was "hard graft" but also one of the most exciting and fulfilling periods of my career.

Then we walked smack bang into the worst drought in living memory, with no meaningful rainfall from September until April the following year. My fledgling nursery business came within a hair's breadth of going under, and for a time I seriously considered pulling the pin. Instead, I decided to put those hard-earned lessons to good use and continued to drive the business forward.

Better times did come – eventually. But as Riversun grew and grew and grew, I started to find myself more and more removed from the daily operations that had once occupied all of my waking hours (and plenty of sleeping ones as well!). Some of our loyal customers, who had stood by Riversun in those early years, began to hint that it had been a long time between visits, or, worse perhaps, that they no longer knew everyone in the company.

Well, that's no longer the case. As we have cut and cut again through the layers of middle management that

once existed at Riversun, we have witnessed the re-emergence of a very strong and very tight little team – much like the Riversun of old (and, in a number of cases, with the same staff veterans still in place). In these challenging times for us all, there's no room for a business owner who won't get his hands dirty – which is great because I *love* getting my hands dirty, as does the rest of the Riversun team.

Steve, our CFO, now does double duty on the tractor when needed as well as all logistics and scheduling. Shed Manager Roberta can now be found in every area of production (and at any hour of the day or night or weekend), while 25-year Riversun veteran Athol covers all potted plant production and many aspects of source material production. While keen to get out into the fields, Rochelle is still office bound, answering the many, many inquiries for vine supply. While total sales are well down on the boom years, the number of clients we now deal with has gone through the roof. Guess that's what happens when the number of vine suppliers drops by 80%! There are a handful of other wonderful staff backing us all up (more on them next time).

One of the most positive things to come out of all of this is that I once again am doing what I most love to do – grafting and growing beautiful grapevines. Gisborne has been pouring on the sunshine over the last couple of weeks and our first "graftlings" are looking fantastic, whether in the callus room, in pots or planted out at the field nursery.

If you would like your order for next year's planting to be tailor-made by this dedicated, passionate and hard-working team, give us a call today. Remember, we are only grafting to order this year and we plan to wrap it up by the end of the week!

Cheers,

Geoff