

Grower profile

Phil Harding



BY HAYLEY WILSON
VEGETABLESWA



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Name Phil and Carolee Harding

Location Elleker

Property size 24ha

Enterprises Corn, pumpkin, melons, beans, tomatoes, cucumbers, zucchinis and chillies

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Phil Harding and his wife Carolee, of Sweet Valley Produce, started growing vegetables as a hobby seven years ago while both still working full time in other industries. In this time, not only has their vegetable growing business grown rapidly, but so too has their love of the growing game.

Originally from Perth but with a bit of country background, Phil and Carolee decided to make the move from the city to Elleker, a region about 15 minutes west of Albany. "We never moved with the intention of growing vegetables, it just happened!" said Phil, acknowledging that the main motivation for the move at this time was their wish to start a family and bring their children up in the country.

After moving to the property, they began growing a variety of vegetables with no real knowledge to make a few dollars on the side while Phil worked in irrigation for Total Eden. As the vegetable business began to expand, Phil and Carolee needed to make the decision whether or not to take the plunge and grow full time as a real business. They eventually made the choice to put everything into growing back in 2008, and have never looked back.

One of their first main crops was pumpkin, due to it being reasonably low maintenance and also because they grew well in the wet, heavy soils of the Grassmere swamp. Later, Phil tried and tested a variety of different crops, pursuing the ones that grew well and leaving the ones that didn't suit the conditions.

Today, the main crop grown by Sweet Valley Produce is sweetcorn.

"When I first started growing sweetcorn I had no idea what I was doing. It took a lot of trial-and-error to get it right."

In the third season they were growing two acres of sweetcorn, which by the fourth season had expanded to 20 acres due to the increased demand from the markets and market agents wanting their produce. Phil and Carolee own 10 acres of their own land and lease a lot of the land around

them. Over the summer months they will have up to 60 acres of crops in the ground. They grow five different types of pumpkins including some of the old heritage varieties like 'Blue Banana' and 'Turk's Turban' that you don't see commercially because, as Phil says; "sometimes people want things that are just a bit different!".

Sweet Valley Produce sends vegetables to the markets in Perth as well as selling produce at their front gate with an honour box system which is how they started. Phil says that with the honour box system it is important to grow a variety of bits and pieces so that if people drive out to buy a pumpkin they are able to get other things to go with it. Some of the produce they offer includes melons, beans, tomatoes, cucumbers, zucchinis and chillies to name a few.

"Sweet corn and pumpkins suit the growing conditions down here — they like the very heavy swamp country. Our soil doesn't suit leaf lines as it is just too heavy. Plus, we noticed the opportunity in the market for the pumpkins and sweetcorn and it has been viable," said Phil about how he makes decisions on what crops to grow.

It has been a long, hard learning curve and a lot of work for Phil, trying to learn the ins and outs of growing and finding the answers on his own.

"I am constantly learning every day. You make mistakes and it costs you money, but you learn from it and move on. You can wipe out a whole crop by making one silly mistake, but that's just how it is — it's a learning curve."

"I have had an enormous amount of help from local people and in particular from our neighbour. He gives us lots of help with the tractors and at harvesting time just because he's got a passion for horticulture and wants to see young people in the industry. There's a rich history of growing in our area and so he's happy to give us a leg-up and help us get going."

A major advantage for the Hardings is that they don't have to irrigate most of what they grow. They plant and grow their crops to suit the soil types and at the time of year that presents the best conditions.


"As long as you work with the moisture in the soil and not against it you don't need to

irrigate which saves a lot of money on water and labour." It is a bit of a gamble though, as the weather can be quite unpredictable on the south coast.

Consumers who buy from Sweet Valley Produce have given feedback that their vegetables are tastier and sweeter than what they are used to, perhaps due to the rich mineral soils and from being able to take up all these nutrients without irrigation water washing them through the soil profile.

The soil being so rich and wet can have its disadvantages too though, as Phil points out. He constantly needs to be on top of the weed management, for example, with the weeds growing so fast and so large in the dense soil. However, with good management, the problems can be minimized and Phil is becoming more successful with each season of experience.

"I enjoy the challenge of everything we do. It can get a bit much at times, but every day is different and always a challenge," he says. "There is nothing more satisfying than producing a good quality crop straight out of the earth for people to eat."

Phil and Carolee have three young girls, Abigail (4), Jessica (2) and very recently welcomed their third, Caitlin, into the world. When they aren't busy running the farm and everything that goes with it, the Hardings enjoy their time relaxing with the family at home or having a chin-wag with their neighbours. 



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