

Salad days are here again

By Jane Milburn

Growing salad leaves in seedling trays at bench height under hail-net, using computer controlled watering and environmental systems, represents a major new shift in the food production business.

With food safety and quality becoming increasingly important, growing baby leaves above ground, enclosed by hail net to keep bad weather and birds at bay, with scrupulous attention paid to hygiene and traceability ...and with regular, misted water supply ... well it's a perfect production environment.

The Smart Salads Company – which is supplying baby leaves for the McDonald's Salads Plus program – has 6ha under crop now and well-advanced plans for a further 9ha expansion of this aspect of the business.

Smart Salads is an offshoot of the Lockyer Valley-based Withcott Seedlings Queensland, which is the largest supplier of vegetable seedlings to the east coast of Australia growing 310 million plants in 2003-04.

The Smart Salads business cleverly takes that seedling production business one step further by evolving it into a salad-leaf food production "factory".

Withcott is a business that has been nurtured from an \$800 start into the Erhart Group of Companies during the past two decades by former psychiatric nurse Wendy Erhart and her mechanic husband Graham.

Wendy believes her work as a nurse provided a natural understanding of systems, processes and logistics which led to the development of the quality management systems that underpin Withcott's success.

Seven years of hail on the home farm when growing up at Stanthorpe also reinforced the need to use protected cropping options, such as the hail nets, to eliminate as much risk as possible.

Fast forward to today and Withcott is an integral link in the supply of fresh food throughout Australia and the Asia-Pacific region and has 14 trucks daily delivering perfectly grown, fully tracked and labelled seedlings on demand to vegetable producers who grow them into \$340 million worth of food.

"It is amazing how innovative Australians have become in order to survive. Improving our systems and training have helped advance our business to the point where we have now designed world-leading software to control and automate our production," Wendy said.

"David Hanlon from Resource Consulting Services has helped me identify that my strengths are in systems and logistics, and I'm now 18 months into a three-year Harvest Executive Link training program which has shown me how to work on the business and not just in the business."

"Training has lifted our business to a corporate level and has allowed us to understand ourselves and the team around us. This education has had a profound affect on many at Withcott Seedlings and has greatly assisted in creating a culture of learning that has allowed change and innovation to be embraced."

The company's software enables Withcott to cater for each of its 960 clients' requirements, working backwards from a client's commitment to supply X tonnes of lettuce to a Melbourne supermarket on December 1 and identifying on what day that seed needs to be planted in seedling trays at Gatton to fulfil the order.

The business has 29 computers and one kilometre of fibre optic cable, it has 6500 orders in the system at any one time and records 14 years of a client's supply history.