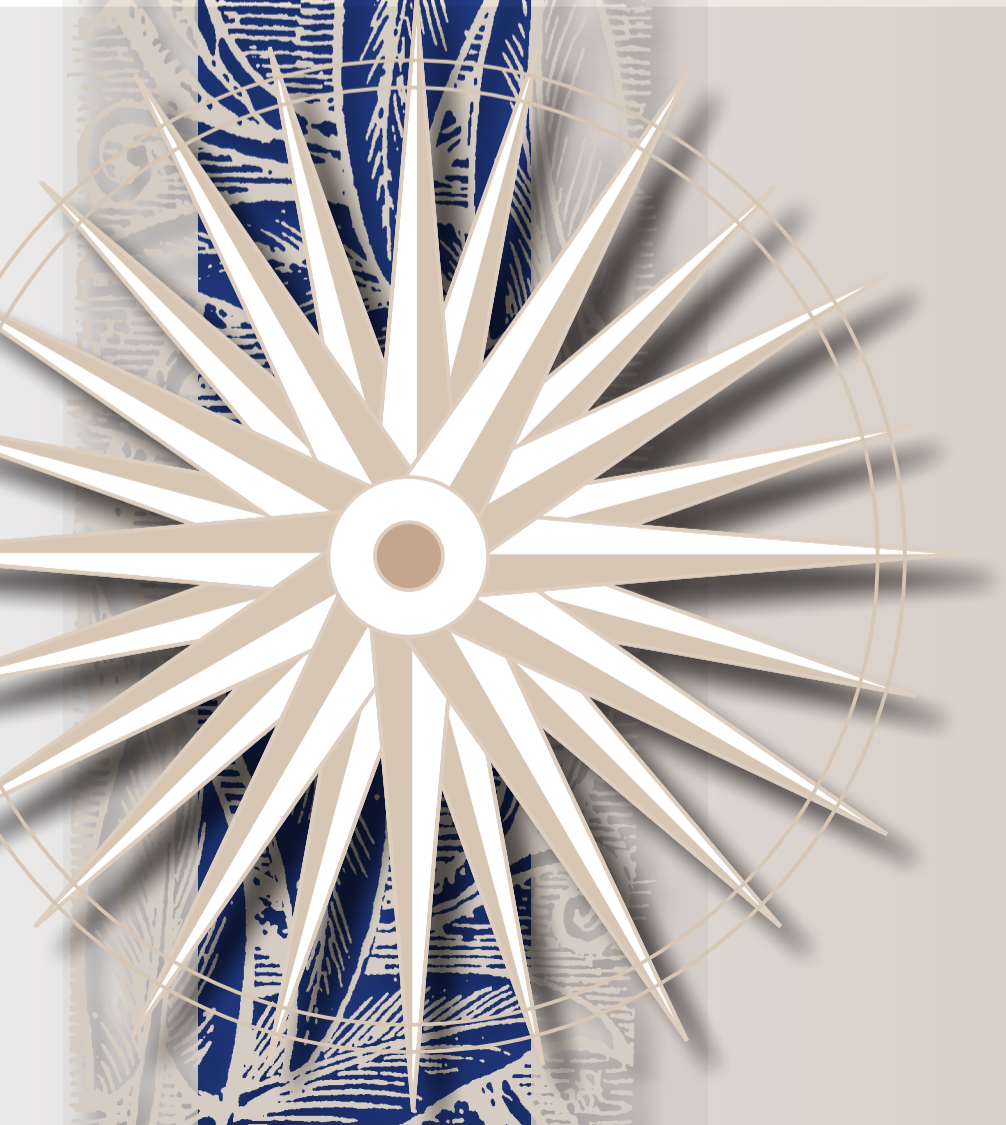


*John Clarke*

Award Citation



**John Clarke** is one of the Horowhenua's most colourful and warmest figures.

Over the past 40 years he has built one of the region's most iconic businesses, that's become one of our biggest employers supplying its produce up and down the country.

John and his father Eric originally started Woodhaven Gardens with just a 2 acre block on Joblins Road. Today their market garden operations occupy 1,800 acres, employing upwards of 260 staff. They are the country's no.1 producer of zucchinis, radishes and table beetroot, growing 21 different varieties of vegetables from broccoli to beetroot, spinach to spring onions.

John likes to say that when he was selling seeds, he thought he should know more about growing vegetables. The truth is, that John has always had a huge appetite for learning.

Long-time market gardeners in the area Jack and Yollene Young recall, when John was selling seeds to them, "he was always a quick learn. What he didn't know, he'd find out." Later when he started his own market garden they became neighbours, and John would try to glean as much knowledge as he could. When he knocked off work early, he would come over and watch what they did, lending a hand planting cauliflowers.

That willingness to learn, read the market and proactively make the right bets for the company is a key formula behind Woodhaven's successful rise. When the retail industry began to consolidate, with independent fruit and veg shops starting to give way to the large national supermarket chains, John helped broker the Capital Greens collective among market gardeners to supply Foodstuffs.

As the business scaled up, Woodhaven introduced its digital logistics and production programme 'Hortrac.' That system enables the business to trace and record every part of their production from planting, harvesting, packing and freight for all products going out the gate; and ensure they're invoicing and being paid. This innovation has substantially improved its efficiency and decision making on the business. It's worth noting that Woodhaven Gardens was a multiple category award winner in the 2018 Electra Business Awards. The judges cited Woodhaven's "ability to be very market and strategically focused," and commended its "workforce culture and the extent to which it engages with staff individually and as a team."

For John, business has always been about family first. A free spirit in his younger days with the pending arrival of his daughter Emma, he decided that he needed a steady job and joined seed company Webling and Stewart as a sales person.

John, and his father Eric made the decision to move to the Horowhenua as his mother had multiple sclerosis and found the hilly terrain of Wellington challenging. Moving to flatter land in Levin made sense, as did building a house where John, his then-wife Honora and his parents could live together.

Woodhaven Gardens remains family owned, and family run. Emma is a director, and very much central in its management and operations. Son Jay Jay, a director is very active in the business. But it's the family atmosphere among its employees that is a signature of the business. Many staff have been at Woodhaven for ten years, and some more than 20 years. It's not uncommon for married couples, siblings and children of employees to pick alongside each other.

John has always displayed a huge heart, but his generosity is often under the radar. But when people have called, he delivers. Like the time when he bought fishing boats for his staff back in Kiribati, so that when they returned back to the islands for the required 3 month stand down, they could maintain a source of income. Woodhaven has embraced its staff, witnessed by the many sports days, touch tournaments and the cultural shows they run.

John has always had a connection to the Chinese community and credits a number of them for helping him get started. He could never speak highly enough of them deeply admiring their work ethic. After delivering his goods at the Wellington markets at 4am in the morning, he would readily enjoy a yarn and breakfast with them at Kenny's Café in Courtenay Place. John was one of the first in line to push for the Chinese market gardener statue to be erected on Oxford Street.

John is a co-founder and trustee of the Horowhenua Taste Trail. He is a big supporter and driver of this event that brings visitors from all around the country, and promotes the region's food production industry.

While Woodhaven continues to be a hugely significant business, John is as comfortable in the fields and working alongside the staff as he is attending industry meetings. Perhaps that's what has endeared him to so many. His achievements in his business, and out in the community makes him wholly qualified to be a 2020 Hall of Fame Laureate.