

Building capability for New Zealand horticulture's future



Kate Scott has been Chief Executive Officer of Horticulture New Zealand since October 2024. She has worked in agribusiness for over 20 years and has significant experience in resource management, environmental policy and planning, and stakeholder engagement, including as Executive Director of environmental consultancy Landpro and founder of GroundHQ. She chairs the New Zealand Rural Leadership Trust and has previously held governance roles with Thriving Southland and WAI Wānaka. She was a Nuffield Scholar in 2018 and is a previous recipient of the Rabobank Australia Emerging Leader award.

In horticulture, succession is often framed as a discussion about land, ownership and what happens to assets over time. Those questions matter, but they are only part of the picture and they can distract from a more fundamental issue facing the sector – how well we are preparing for the next 25 years. The road to 2050 will be shaped not just by who owns farms but by whether we build profitable, resilient, growing businesses that can invest in people, innovation and new ways of working.

Looking ahead, there is genuine opportunity for New Zealand growers. Global consumers are paying closer attention to health, sustainability and where their food comes from, and our sector is well placed to respond. We already produce food that feeds families, aligns with changing diets and carries a strong story of origin, which creates space to move beyond selling raw product alone towards functional foods, nutrition-led innovation and higher-value exports that connect horticulture more closely with food science and health outcomes.

We are already seeing early signs of what this could look like, from Zespri's work securing health claims and opening new value pathways for kiwifruit to Māori growers taking indigenous kiwifruit branding into international markets such as Dubai. Together, these examples point to where future growth could come from, but turning promise into scale will require sustained investment, stronger technical capability and greater confidence across the system.

Capital intense

None of this happens without profitable growing businesses. Horticulture is capital intensive and many crops require large upfront investment and long lead times before returns appear. Establishing an orchard takes years before it reaches full production. Meanwhile, growers face climate risk, labour shortages, rising costs, market volatility and immediate debt repayments in most instances. Profitability underpins all of this, and without it, growers cannot invest in new systems, adopt technology or plan for the long term. Evolution becomes something to manage rather than something to build towards.

Technology is often presented as the answer to many of the challenges facing horticulture, but its role looks very different depending on where you stand in the system. In areas such as packhouses and processing, automation and data systems are already delivering productivity gains and improving consistency. In orchards and fields, progress has been more gradual. Harvest

robotics continue to advance, but for most growers, skilled people remain the most practical and dependable option, and that is unlikely to change in the near term.

My sense is that the biggest gains will come from simpler, more targeted tools. Better data to manage climate and soil risk, digital systems that connect growers more directly with buyers and practical analytics that support day-to-day decision making are likely to have a far greater impact than complex or speculative solutions. The value lies not in technology for its own sake but in tools that reduce friction and make it easier to run a growing business well.

There are already examples of this approach making a real difference. The Carbon Robotics LaserWeeder™ uses high-resolution camera sensors and AI-guided lasers to identify and remove weeds in crops such as carrots. By targeting weeds while leaving crops untouched and soil largely undisturbed, it shows how well-applied technology can address persistent problems in a way that supports both productivity and sustainability.

Diversification on the menu

Horticulture New Zealand works with a diverse group of growers across crops and regions. That diversity brings strength, but it also brings complexity. Every grower faces a slightly distinct set of challenges, which makes collective action harder. We operate with limited resources and try to focus on the issues that matter most to growers, often balancing immediate pressures with longer-term planning. That long-term work matters, even when today feels overwhelming.

One of the biggest changes I expect by 2050 is how farms are structured. I do not think land use will look the same as it does now. Climate risk and financial pressure will push more businesses toward diversified models, where a single property may support multiple enterprises to spread risk and create more stable income. Ownership models will evolve too, with more partnerships and shared equity arrangements. Future growers may not own land outright, but they will still need strong leadership skills, commercial judgement and systems thinking.

This shift is already visible. Many young growers I speak with are passionate about horticulture but do not see a realistic pathway to owning land. That does not reflect a lack of ambition. It points to the need for better models that allow people to build careers and businesses without requiring full ownership from day one.

Growing role for Māori

Māori participation will be central to the sector's future. Since 2018, horticulture on Māori-owned land has grown significantly, and much of the sector's future expansion is likely to come from Māori whenua. Many organisations are looking to move into higher-value land use that delivers both economic returns and benefits for their communities. This brings exciting possibilities, including indigenous branding and the integration of mātauranga Māori into growing systems. It also comes with real challenges – access to finance on multiply owned land, infrastructure, water availability and governance capability. If this growth is to succeed, investment frameworks and policy settings need to reflect these realities.

Regulation plays a role here too. Environmental standards matter, but overly complex systems can slow progress and discourage innovation. If we want growers to adapt and invest, we need practical pathways that support responsible change rather than unintentionally blocking it.


There is another shift that matters just as much – how growers see themselves in relation to one another. Often people assume their situation is unique, but when you step back, the same themes appear across crops and regions – labour, climate risk, compliance and succession. These shared challenges mean there is real value in learning from each other. Collaboration does not remove competition. Growers will always compete in markets – but working together strengthens influence, spreads good ideas and helps the sector speak more clearly when decisions are being made.

Leading with intent

My concern is that, without clear intent, the sector risks simply drifting forward. Growers are under constant pressure, policy settings change with each government and markets continue to shift in ways that are often outside our control. If we are not deliberate about where we are heading, the future will arrive by default rather than by design.

There is still a choice to be made. We can allow consolidation and structural change to shape the sector around us, or we can actively build a future that supports a broader range of people, invests in capability and keeps growers at the heart of New Zealand's food system. This is not just a question of who owns land but of whether horticulture remains an attractive and viable option for young people who want to lead, innovate and build long-term careers. That, in turn, depends on sustained investment in education and training across technology, agronomy and post-harvest skills as well as continued growth in Māori participation as a core part of the sector's future.

The decisions being made now – policy settings, investment priorities and how we support people and work together – will shape what horticulture looks like in 2050. My hope is that those stepping into the sector in the decades ahead do so with confidence, feel supported in their work and understand that what they do matters not only to their own businesses and families but to Aotearoa's role in feeding the world.



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