

# Profile: Neil Handasyde — Handasyde Strawberries & Café, Albany Western Australia

Helen Newman, Berry Industry Development Officer, Agricultural Produce Commission

Neil is President of the Strawberry Growers Association of WA, and Chair of the Agricultural Produce Commission Strawberry Producers Committee. We take a behind the scenes look at Neil's diverse operations.

Neil grew up in Mount Barker on a sheep property with his 3 older sisters and 4 older brothers. His eldest brother, Ian (Deceased), started growing strawberries on the family property in 1972, laying the plastic of the first patch of strawberries with shovels, when Neil was just 4 years old. This gave Neil a taste for strawberries and, in 1991, he purchased a 36ha property in Albany where he started his very own strawberry farm.

"Albany seemed like the ideal location. The climate in Albany is cooler than Mount Barker, which is better for strawberries, and there is easier access to water and staff. The sandy soil also seemed good - I am slightly regretting that now though. We planted 60,000 runners in our first year here; we plant many more now, with 5ha under organic production and 12ha of conventional production in open fields."

Neil and wife Lyn started to diversify into organics in 2006, spurred along by personal health challenges and community concern about the growing number of health and allergy issues associated with food products.

"We are what we eat, and always will be, is our motto. Organics aligns with our values and gives us differentiation in the market; the higher price point of organically grown produce has helped offset the lower yields and higher inputs."

"Moving into organics was a big learning curve, which was really good. You need to challenge the way you do things and come up with better ways of tackling problems. It is very pleasing to see more businesses embracing softer approaches to growing. Back then,

many of the organic technologies and practices were seen as snake oil, today they are valuable tools used by a broad spectrum of growers, including broadacre agriculture"

The Handasyde's expanded their operation in 2018, purchasing a retiring grower's property (15ha). That site is now home to their very popular café and value-adding side of their business.

"This new property has allowed us to rotate our plantings to achieve a longer soil rotation and has given us the space and ability to value-add and diversify.

"A 'Value Adding Agribusiness Investment Attraction Fund' grant from the State government last year allowed us to purchase an 80kg capacity freeze-drying machine. The machine has helped diversify the business and has reduced berry wastage. We use it to process small and over-ripe fruit that would normally be thrown away. The freeze-drier preserves products through a process called 'sublimation'. Products are frozen to -30°C, then under extreme vacuum heating, ice changes straight from a solid to a gas.

**Freeze drying is 100% safe and leaves behind all the good bits like natural sugars, vitamins, minerals and most importantly flavour! You are left with the perfect snack food.**



**Neil Handasyde**



**Freeze drying equipment**



**Handasyde's Forever Fresh Freeze-Dried Strawberries**

“We have been processing our own strawberries, ‘Handasyde’s Forever Fresh Freeze-Dried Strawberries’, and a variety of other products under contract including truffles, apples, mangoes and even some high-protein meat destined for scientific research. Enquiries from other producers across the state continue to grow as new markets for freeze-dried products emerge. The health, taste and convenience of the products are being realised by households and high-end chefs alike. Freeze dried products are no longer just for astronauts, soldiers and mountaineers!”

The Handasyde’s value adding ventures have also seen them produce their own lines of organic eggs, Gelato ice cream, jam, marmalade, relish, sauces and syrups. YUM!

Neil is not one to shy away from applying for grants that help build his business. He recently received another state government grant for a bagging machine to package his freeze-dried products. “Packaging up freeze-dried products by hand is very labour intensive and costly. This new machine weighs, packages and seals the products in a light-weight bag, it also attaches barcodes and has a metal detector.”

Grants for business development pop up regularly, targeted at initiatives that provide benefits to the economy, community, or environment in addition to the benefits provided to the receiving business.

“When applying for grants, you need to be very clear on what they’re after. Give them a call and ask questions, don’t rely on your own interpretation of what they are asking for. Get help with writing the application too, you need to use the right wording and make sure your application aligns with the objectives of the grant.”

### **The Handasyde ethos**

“Paying it back to our community is important to us. We are incredibly grateful to the huge number of Albany residents who support local farmers first. We use Handasyde Strawberries and Café to sponsor a number of community groups and sporting clubs in the local area. We also ensure that everything we sell is made from locally sourced ingredients where possible and we use local suppliers and contractors for everything from garden statues, to honey, to earthworks and construction.



**We believe that having happy staff is the most important measure of business success. People are the heart and soul of our business, and our staff make it all happen. We treat our staff like family, and work hard to work with them when they are facing difficulties in and out of the workplace. A safe and welcoming physical and emotional environment is essential to the productivity and success of our business.**

