

Pirongia vegetable farm rebrands and plans to expand

28 May, 2020 9:00am



Owner of Pirongia Mountain Vegetables, Tony Cato, and his daughter Piper up bright and early to check the vegetables on the farm. Photo / Caitlan Johnston

By: Caitlan Johnston
caitlan.johnston@nzme.co.nz

A vegetable growing business based in Pirongia has come out of Covid-19 lockdown with a new name and a plan to expand.

Tony Cato has rebranded his business from Cato's Potatoes and Garlic to Pirongia Mountain Vegetables after spending the last five years expanding the business's variety and volume of vegetables after taking over the reins from his parents.

"I've always been quite keen on what they (parents) did but now I've just taken a step up to get the business to a level where it can sustain a family by increasing the volume and the variety we offer," says Tony.

Judy and Richard Cato started the business in 2001 selling homegrown potatoes and garlic from a small stall on their driveway in Kaipaki and then at farmers' markets across in Hamilton and Cambridge.

The decision to move the business to Pirongia came after Tony and his family moved to the village and he noticed the volcanic soil was ideal for growing vegetables.

Typically Tony would go to the Hamilton, Cambridge and Tauranga farmers' markets to sell the produce but that all changed when Covid-19 hit and the country went into lockdown.



Tony Cato's daughter Piper (right) says her favourite vegetable to pick is red kumara. Photo / Caitlan Johnston

Overnight the business lost 95 per cent of its income as the farmers' markets came to a halt for eight weeks.

Fortunately for Tony, he could continue operating throughout the lockdown with online ordering and deliveries.

"Getting the produce to the locals without a store has been difficult but now that we've got online ordering we're able to deliver free to locals on Tuesdays and Fridays as well as a delivery service to Hamilton and Cambridge," says Tony.

"Connecting with locals over this period has been amazing and to see them all and finally get their produce to them."

Now that daily life is starting to get back to normal, Tony is focused on opening a shop front in Te Awamutu.

He says it's been hard to service Te Awamutu because there is no regular farmers' market to attend and sell from each week or weekend.

Tony is looking for a space for the shop and hopes he will be able to open by the spring.

"The ultimate plan is that we want to open a one-stop shop, Pirongia Mountain Vegetables Farm Shop, and I'm looking at the moment at where that can be located," says Tony.

"The shop will be a central point. I want to run the whole vegetable business out of there, deliveries will go out of there but people will still be able to come into the shop and there will also be click and collect. I'm quite excited."



Each fortnight they plant 4,500 vegetable plants. Photo / Caitlan Johnston

To prepare for the new shop Tony says they have been planting extra vegetables so that there is plenty ready to go by spring.

Each fortnight they plant 4500 vegetable plants and currently there is about 18,000 planted. All the vegetables are also spray-free.

The vegetables they offer include broccoli, cabbage, napa cabbage, red cabbage, cauliflower, leeks, pumpkin, silverbeet, red kumara, garlic and five different types of potatoes.

They also have carrots, onions, parsnips and free range eggs in stock but these items are outsourced from other growing regions.

To order vegetables visit catos.co.nz and visit Pirongia Mountain Vegetables Facebook page to keep up to date with what's happening on the farm.