

Chair and Chief Executive Message

The 2025/26 year reinforced a simple reality: New Zealand horticulture is growing in a world that won't stand still or stop delivering shocks.

Across the year, the sector continued to deliver strong performance amid mounting and intersecting pressures - extreme weather events, biosecurity incursions, rising input costs and ongoing global volatility.

These pressures have been particularly acute for vegetable growers, who have faced further uncertainty following the closure of key processing operations, including McCain and Wattie's facilities. The loss of long-standing processing pathways has added to concerns about market access, regional employment and the resilience of New Zealand's domestic vegetable supply chain.

That volatility was brought into sharp focus in February 2026 with the Middle East conflict. For a war so far from our shores, we felt the ripple effects almost straight away.

Instability in global energy markets flowed quickly through to higher fuel prices, increased freight costs and renewed pressure on already stretched supply chains.

For a sector reliant on the timely movement of perishable goods, these shocks translated directly into margin pressure at the farm gate and across the value chain.

Yet horticulture is not defined by disruption. It is defined by how growers - and the wider sector - respond to it.

Over the past 12 months, growers up and down the country demonstrated hard work, adaptability and a commitment to producing high-quality nutritious food for New Zealanders and the world. That same determination is reflected across the wider system that supports them.

At Horticulture New Zealand (HortNZ), our role is to ensure that effort is matched by systems, policy settings and support that enable long-term success for our growers.

A year of progress

Despite the volatility, the sector continued to grow.

Horticultural exports reached new record highs, with the Ministry for Primary Industries forecasting export revenue to rise to \$9.2 billion in the year to June 2026. Strong global demand, alongside progress in markets, continues to underpin that growth.

A significant milestone was the conclusion of trade negotiations between New Zealand and India.

Improved access for products such as apples, kiwifruit, cherries, avocados and persimmons represents a long-term opportunity to strengthen resilience in a rapidly changing global trading environment.

In August 2025, HortNZ launched the roadmap for the Aotearoa Horticulture Action Plan - a shift from ambition into implementation and a more co-ordinated approach to long-term growth. There is a lot of good work that has been completed and is currently underway that is driving progress towards the AHAP goals.

That same focus on practical progress is evident at the farm level. The Growing Change programme has been completed, with growers implementing freshwater farm plans that are driving measurable improvements in nutrient management, water use efficiency and on-farm environmental practices.

Importantly, this work is demonstrating that compliance does not need to come at the expense of productivity - and that well-designed systems can support both better environmental outcomes and commercial performance.

We are also seeing important structural shifts within the sector. The continued growth of Māori-owned land being converted into horticulture reflects both the long-term opportunity of the industry and the increasing role of Māori as leaders and investors in its future.

This year also marked HortNZ's 20th anniversary.

Two decades ago, HortNZ was established to bring together a diverse industry under a single voice.

Since then, it has helped shape many of the systems that underpin modern horticulture - from New Zealand Good Agricultural Practice (NZGAP) and the Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme to co-ordinated responses to biosecurity incursions and major weather events.

Over that time, the sector itself has transformed into a globally competitive, export-focused industry recognised for its quality, innovation and sustainability.



The anniversary event at Parliament in December was not just a moment to reflect, but to acknowledge the collective effort of growers, leaders and partners - and to reinforce the importance of continuing to evolve at pace with the world around us.

Operating conditions under increasing pressure

While performance remains strong, the operating environment is becoming more complex and unpredictable for growers.

Extreme weather continued to shape the year. Cyclone Vaianu caused less damage than Cyclone Gabrielle, but significant disruption remained - from flooding in Nelson-Tasman to heavy rainfall across Northland, Bay of Plenty and the East Coast, alongside challenging conditions for growers.

These events reinforced the vulnerability of critical infrastructure, particularly rural transport networks.

Reliable access to markets remains critical for a sector producing perishable goods, and investment in resilient infrastructure continues to be a key priority.

That was underlined in research commissioned for the AHAP that revealed many growing regions depend on a single major route or packaging hub, creating vulnerabilities for perishable crops that must reach domestic and international consumers quickly and efficiently.

Biosecurity also remained front of mind. Responses to detections of the Oriental Fruit Fly and the emergence of the Yellow-Legged Hornet highlighted both the risks facing the sector and the importance of a coordinated, well-resourced robust national system.

At the same time, global instability including the ongoing conflict in the Middle East - continues to flow through into fuel prices, shipping availability, insurance costs and overall supply chain reliability.

For many growers, this has meant sustained pressure on margins despite strong top-line performance.

Advocacy focused on long-term system settings

In response, HortNZ strengthened its focus on the long-term settings needed to support a productive and resilient sector.

Our election manifesto set out clear priorities for government - including stronger biosecurity protection, improved access to crop protection tools, reduced regulatory duplication, secure water availability, climate adaptation settings, fair market settings, and investment in enabling infrastructure.

We also continued to advocate for recognition of horticulture as an essential sector, ensuring continuity of production during periods of disruption.

Access to modern crop protection tools remains a critical issue, and we have pushed for better regulatory alignment and more timely approval pathways.

We played an active role in the review of the Recognised Seasonal Employer scheme, working with government and Pacific partners to ensure it remains effective, fair and sustainable.

Across the year, HortNZ made 53 submissions on issues ranging from resource management reform to biosecurity and workforce settings, while continuing to advocate for vegetable growing to be recognised as a permitted activity.

Building capability and celebrating excellence

People remain at the heart of the sector's future - and this year highlighted both the depth of talent and the importance of continued investment in capability.

The Young Grower of the Year competition once again showcased the next generation of leaders, culminating in a national final that brought together the best emerging talent from every growing region.

The 2025 winner, Phoebe Scherer, typified the capability, professionalism and leadership that defines the future of New Zealand horticulture.

Events like Young Grower are more than competitions - they are a visible reminder that the sector's future is already taking shape.

At the same time, the Horticulture Industry Awards recognised the growers, researchers and businesses whose dedication continues to lift standards across the industry.

These awards highlighted the breadth of contribution required to sustain a high-performing sector - from innovation and environmental stewardship through to leadership and workforce development.

HortNZ's Leadership Programme continues to build leadership capability, while industry training scholarships are strengthening the pipeline of skilled workers across the country.

We are grateful to the New Zealand Fruitgrowers Charitable Trust for its continued support of HortNZ initiatives, particularly in enabling leadership development and industry capability programmes.

We also continued to build capability at a governance level, with new appointments to the Board further strengthening our strategic oversight and future leadership pathways.

Ripeka Evans was appointed as an independent director, Kirstie Lovie was appointed as an associate director and Shaun Vickers, Simon Cook and Dermott Malley joined the board as grower elected directors.

Strengthening systems and assurance

Progress this year also extended to the systems that underpin trust in New Zealand horticulture.

NZGAP's selection of new assurance partners - the first comprehensive review in more than 15 years - ensures the programme continues to meet the highest standards of food safety, environmental performance and social responsibility.

A key focus ahead will be improving the digital experience for certified operators while maintaining international credibility and trust.

Looking back, and looking forward

Reflecting on 20 years since HortNZ was established, the evolution of the sector is clear.

From the development of NZGAP and the establishment of the RSE scheme, to responding to biosecurity threats and recovering from major events such as Cyclone Gabrielle and COVID-19, the industry has become more capable, more connected and more resilient.

Today, New Zealand horticulture is globally recognised not only for its productivity and export success, but for its innovation, sustainability credentials and ability to respond under pressure.

Every one of us at HortNZ is proud to serve a sector that continues to adapt, invest and grow in an increasingly complex world.

As that world becomes more volatile, the need for coherent, enabling and forward-looking policy settings becomes more urgent.

The future success of horticulture will depend on how well New Zealand responds - through investment, through partnership, and through a shared commitment to long-term food production capability.

To all growers and supply partners, it's been a privilege to serve you over the past 12 months.

Thank you for placing your trust in HortNZ.



A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink.

Bernadine Guilleux
HortNZ Board Chair



A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink.

Kate Scott
HortNZ Chief Executive