



Taking a scholarly

Tasmanian greenhouse grower Anthony Brandsema talks to Tim Richards about how recent travel opportunities have contributed to the success of his business.

When Anthony Brandsema became a grower, he had no idea it would help him see the world... or at least the agricultural parts of it. But that's what happened this year, as he travelled to diverse parts of the globe as a winner of the Nuffield Farming Scholarship.

The Nuffield Scholarship, awarded each year, allows a group of young farmers to travel internationally, learning about agricultural techniques and opportunities across a range of countries. Recipients take part in an intense Global Focus program that allows them to see growers' issues in a worldwide context. When they come home, they pass on their acquired knowledge to the Australian industry at large.

Anthony was one of six Australians in this year's Nuffield dozen, undergoing a dizzying tour including New Zealand, the Netherlands, Britain, France, Spain, Mexico, the USA and Canada over four months.

So, what is Anthony's farming background? From Tasmania, Anthony and his family's business,

J&A Brandsema Pty Ltd, has come to focus on greenhouse tomato growing.

"It was a bit evolutionary," said Anthony, explaining the move to the greenhouse. "Dad started on the property in the 1950s and grew a number of vegetable lines, but we're in black sand here. Black sand isn't necessarily mineral rich – imagine beach sand, but black. It wasn't the ideal soil to be growing vegetables in."

Moving to greenhouse production allowed a certain measure of control over climatic variations, and less reliance on seasonal factors. "We had a very good market window after Christmas, when there wasn't anyone picking tomatoes outside yet. The trick was to extend our season, and to do that we moved to the high tech greenhouses."

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approach to growing

Nowadays the business supplies a range of outlets with tomatoes and cherry tomatoes, from the major supermarket chains down to corner shops and restaurants. “We’re not locked into any one particular market,” said Anthony. “In fact, our third biggest customer is a corner shop in Hobart.”

As successful as the family business is, there’s always more to learn. Though exhausted by the whirlwind nature of the

Nuffield tour, Anthony is enthusiastic about his immersion into global agriculture.

“The tour itself was mind blowing, just the exposure to so many different things,” he said. “We didn’t necessarily relate every experience to our own day-to-day operations, but it’s important to look over the fence and see what other industries are out there, and how they cope with their issues.”

The scholarship program was deliberately broad in its approach, taking tour members beyond their own familiar areas. “We looked across the whole range of crops and agriculture in general, including dairy, beef and lamb production, and grain growing and canola production. We did see a lot of vegetable production too.”

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Taking a scholarly approach to growing (continued)

Of course, agriculture is about more than what happens in the paddock, as the grower grapples with outside forces like government policies and market movements. Anthony was intrigued to discover that growers across the world had similar problems and challenges in this area.

“The general problems were recurring – the removal of subsidies in the EU was an interesting subject. The cost of fuel in North America was getting higher and higher. And unskilled or seasonal labour seemed to be an issue all over the world, being able to get people to work for you when you need them at harvest time.”

Another common factor discussed by growers across the world was the potential of China in the global market, either as an opportunity or a threat. Anthony takes a broad view of this issue, seeing the mammoth nation as a source of export opportunities. “The number of people moving into China’s cities must be fed. And if they’re adopting some of Western culture, they’re going to adopt some Western tastes as well.”

One of the side benefits of the Nuffield experience is the creation of a useful network among the group of recipients who travelled together. You might wonder if the 12 Nuffield scholars would be at each other’s throats after being at close quarters over such an intense period of travel and study, but Anthony insists they stayed friendly, and is convinced of the value of the group experience.

“We all got on well because we had to - we were sort of thrust together. But everything we saw was different from what we were used to on our own properties, so that gave us plenty to talk about. But there’s potential in any one of us to do something beyond our farm gate, so we were always talking about that as well.”

Now that he’s home, Anthony’s next task is to spread the knowledge he’s picked up from the experience. Nuffield scholars compile a report of the tour, and give presentations to growers at both formal and informal functions.

He’ll also be picking up the threads of his other industry involvement in the Greenhouse Advisory Group, and as part of the Vegetables Australia editorial committee.

And he’s also getting back to the challenges of greenhouse tomato growing in Tasmania, and eyeing up the possibilities of the export market to Asia. No doubt his co-manager and brother Marcus, and his father, will be glad to see the wandering scholar back home. ■

