



## Best in hort

Erin Atkinson of Tauranga is the first woman to win the New Zealand Young Grower of the Year title. Read about her achievements and where to next for this young horticulturalist on page 5. Photo Tracy Hardy.

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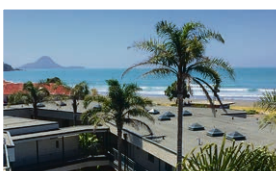
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# Tractor driving and nail gun skills all part of the test

COVER STORY

Erin Atkinson, the first woman to win the New Zealand Young Grower of the Year award, left nothing to chance in preparing to go head to head with four male competitors.

She swatted hard for the theory tests and honed her skills, including tractor driving and using a nail gun in preparation for the day-long contest in Christchurch in August.

"I had some good advice from previous Bay of Plenty Young Grower winners Craig Ward and Chris Clements who had competed at the nationals," says Erin, who in February also became the first woman to win the Bay of Plenty Young Fruit Grower of the Year.

Erin, 30-year-old technical advisor for Apata Group in Te Puke, has a Bachelor of Science in Horticulture and has spent most of her working life in the horticulture industry. She is also the third Apata employee to win the Bay of Plenty Young Grower award.

Erin is extremely proud to have been named Young Grower, especially as the standard of the other finalists was very high.

"It was an extremely challenging competition but I've really enjoyed meeting the other finalists. There was a lot of good natured banter between us and I now have four new friends in the industry. That's another advantage of taking part, the people you meet, including from different areas of the horticultural industry."

Runner-up for Young Grower was Scott Wilcox of Pukekohe, who is also Young Vegetable Grower 2017 and third place went to Ben Geaney of Waimate.

## Future leaders

The Young Grower of the Year is an annual competition to determine the best young grower in the country and is run by Horticulture New Zealand and sponsored by the Horticulture Trust.

The competition is now in its 11th year and is part of Horticulture New Zealand's strategy to support the growth and development of New Zealand's future horticultural leaders.

During the competition, all five finalists are required to compete in a series of practical and theoretical challenges designed to test the skills needed to run a successful export-focused horticultural business.

Erin says she did not expect, nor did she receive, any quarter in the competition. "I expected to compete on an equal footing with the other contestants and be judged on my skills. I work in a male-dominated industry so I'm used to working alongside men. The important thing is being able to do your job and do it well."

Erin says she was probably slower at the tractor driving than the men and not quite as skilful at using a nail gun to assemble a crate as they were.

"However, I did finish the crate task in the time, and thanks to advice from Craig and Chris, made sure I had the smooth sides of

the boards on the inside of the crate."

When it came to the speech contest, Erin had a range of ideas for the topic on how to encourage every New Zealander to become involved with biosecurity.

"We need to tailor the message about how important biosecurity is to this country so everyone understands the potential impacts. Those in the industry know how important it is to keep unwanted organisms out but we need to inform urban residents that incursions will affect them too."

She also advocates appointing biosecurity champions, well-known leaders from outside the industry who would help raise awareness of the importance of keeping unwanted pests and disease out of the country. Judges looked for individuals who could make a difference in their sectors and the industry, going beyond great skills to also include leadership, attitude and personality.

CEO of New Zealand Kiwifruit Growers Inc, Nikki Johnson says, "I congratulate Erin and her supporters on winning the Young Grower of the Year competition. It's great news for the kiwifruit industry that the winner of the BOP final has now gone on to win the national competition."

## Career opportunities

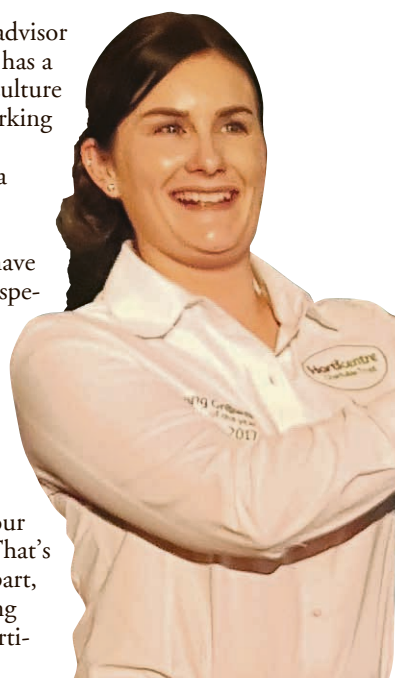
A core area of NZKGI's work is to show how attractive career options are in the kiwifruit industry. Competitions such as the BOP Young Fruit Competition not only showcase the industry's talented future leaders but also support the development and growth of skilled personnel in the kiwifruit industry.

Horticulture New Zealand chief executive Mike Chapman says the aim of the competition is to foster excellence among young growers and future-proof a \$5.6 billion industry that exports 60 per cent of total production to 124 countries.

"The Young Grower competition is a great way to nurture the interest and passion of younger generations as well as showcase the industry. It's a very rewarding industry to be in and it is so encouraging to see the depth of young talent demonstrated. We look forward to seeing the career progression of each of these potential industry leaders."

Erin will now go on to compete for a share of \$40,000 worth of prizes in the Young Horticulturalist of the Year competition. Competitors in the Young Horticulturalist of the Year are drawn from the winners of the country's six horticultural competitions.

Elaine Fisher



Erin Atkinson of Te Puke is the 2017 New Zealand Young Grower of the Year.

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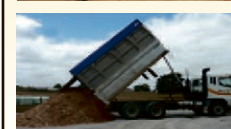
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