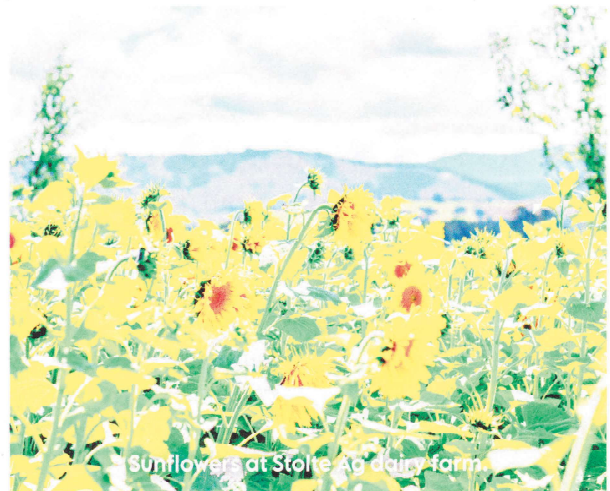


Stolte Ag dairy farm's sunflower field raised \$12,500 for a local charity.



Sunflowers at Stolte Ag dairy farm.

fields of gold... coin

Sunflowers are guaranteed to brighten someone's day. This summer, three sunflower fields brightened the bank accounts of local causes too.



From left, Max, Lottie, Andrew and Jacko Rayner planted out their Gladstone Sunflower Patch for a good old-fashioned fundraiser.

Summer is always a floriferous affair full of blooms of various colours. For some Wairarapa locals though, this past summer has been distinctly gold-tinged.

Thousands of locals enjoyed guided walks through numerous sunflower fields, got the chance to pick their own blooms and even enjoyed a Sunflower Sundowner concert – all while giving generously to local causes.

Stolte Ag dairy farm, the Gladstone Sunflower Patch and Ruamāhanga Farm had opened their gates to the public in January and February to raise thousands of dollars for their chosen charities.

However, it wasn't always plain sailing for all of them. Lottie Rayner of the Gladstone Sunflower Patch says they experienced a tough start to the season thanks to pests and poor weather. "Our initial crop was attacked by cut worm that came through and ate all of the sunflowers," she recalls. "After we replanted it, November and December were really dry, followed by cold and rainy weather in January, so that was challenging as well. But in the end, the sunflowers looked really cool and there were heaps to pick."

Lottie and her husband, Andrew, used their sunflower fields to raise money for the Kuranui College First XI boys' hockey team. Their son, Jacko, plays in the team, which competes in a national tournament each year. "By the time you get 15 boys to a tournament, pay the turf fees, feed them and find them somewhere to stay, it really adds up," she says.

Lottie estimates they planted about 70,000 sunflowers over one hectare this year. In total, they managed to raise about one-third of the \$12,000 they took in last year, due to the shorter season. Visitors paid \$2 admission and pick-your-own sunflowers were \$2 each. "Some people don't want to pick; they just come to have a walk through and a picnic," she says.

After the weather hassles they experienced this year, the Rayners plan to pivot to offer other flower crops in 2026. "We've come up with a few ideas that still involve flowers and pick-your-own options."

Meanwhile, the Stolte Ag dairy farm, nursery and garden centre in Carterton raised \$12,500 for local pregnancy and baby loss support service, Hōkai Tahi. The charity is close to the hearts of farm owners Elise and Clarence Stolte, as a family member was involved in setting it up in 2016.

Entry to the sunflower field, which was opened in January, was free. Visitors paid \$2 a stem for the pick-your-own sunflowers, which proved to be a popular option. "Some people picked one sunflower, some picked 50.

One person was using them for her wedding," says Elise. "I'd estimate we had about 3000 visitors over the three weeks we were open."

The Stoltes had planted the sunflowers densely, with the 0.2ha field home to about 16,000 sunflowers that grew well over 2m tall. "It felt like you were in a bit of a maze. People made their own little tracks, so there was a web of paths through the field."

In future, Elise would like to see the Wairarapa region collectively market itself as the flower-picking capital of New Zealand. "About two-thirds of our visitors came over from Wellington for the day, and I know they were going to visit the lavender farms to pick there as well," she explains.

On the outskirts of Martinborough, Ruamāhanga Farm opened its gates for two weekends in February to raise money for wetland planting and the development of a public walkway by the Ruamāhanga River, which borders the farm. Some of the proceeds will also go towards the farm's education and conservation work.

The Ruamāhanga Farm Foundation is a registered charity with a mission to deliver nature-based education, arts, health and wellness activities, as well as restoring the farm's native biodiversity.

This year's Sunflower Fest – which aimed to raise up to \$10,000 – offered school visits at the start of February. This was followed by guided farm walks and sunflower harvest days for the public later in the month; for an entry fee of \$10, visitors received a guided walk through the farm to a nine-hectare block of huge sunflower blooms, and five pick-your-own sunflowers. Finally, an evening concert featuring local musicians, the Sunflower Sundowner, was also held.

One of the foundation's trustees, Jane Riddiford, said the sunflowers represented the beginning of a "regenerative journey" for the farm. Previously a traditional stock and crop farm, it is being transitioned into a regenerative farming venture. She describes it as "agriculture meets horticulture meets community meets education meets sustainability meets wellbeing."

One thing all of the sunflower owners agree on is that growing the cheerful blooms is good for the soul.

"Walking through the sunflower field is simply lovely. It's so full of bees and butterflies and birds," says Jane. "You feel very alive." ■



MARISA KING caught the gardening bug from her parents while growing up in Ōtaki. She is now an enthusiastic home gardener and enjoys growing flowers, shrubs and veges on a quarter-acre section in Masterton.