



Seedling tray of kōwhiri.



Tōtara in a Sustaina Grow wool pot.



Harry McGruddy, left, and Jake Shannon.

GROWING LOCAL

Celebrating a volunteer-powered nursery giving back in a big way.



From left: Sam Kjestrup, Katrina Morris, Joan Kjestrup, Amy Wills and Talia Shadbolt.

When you gaze across the tidy rows of 49,000 native tree seedlings at the community nursery, it would be easy to mistake it for a commercial operation.

However, in this small Wairarapa settlement east of Masterton, a group of dedicated gardeners are turning the seedlings at the Wainuioru School and Community Nursery into much-needed funds for their neighbourhood.

It all started in 2020, when the Wainuioru Community River Care Group received government funding to improve water quality in the local catchment area. Most of the money went towards river restoration and tree planting on land that farmers had retired from grazing. But as part of the funding bid, \$50,000 was earmarked to establish a native tree nursery next to Wainuioru School.

The river group planned to plant 300,000 native seedlings over three years, and having a nursery would eliminate the need to buy thousands of plants from out of town. "We wanted to go large scale, but none of us really knew what we were doing," says Kelsey Shannon, who was a member of the river group and now chairs the nursery team. "We just made it up as we went along."

Surprisingly, \$50,000 didn't go that far, once you factored in big ticket items such as earthworks, infrastructure and irrigation. But local businesses and farmers soon came to the party. "We couldn't have done it without the community's support," Kelsey says. "The ground work alone was priced at \$24,000 but the local contractor only charged us \$5000. We were very lucky."

The nursery was created as a separate entity so it could sell plants to the river group. But once the catchment planting was completed, it began turning its attention to other markets.

Currently, the nursery has a contract with Akura Plant Nursery in Masterton, which supplies many of the plants to the Wairarapa planting programmes of the Greater Wellington Regional Council. The plan is to supply Akura with nearly 40,000 plants this winter, with the remaining "few thousand" trees destined for sale to the public.

Seed germination is outsourced to an external supplier, with the resulting seedlings being potted out by a team of dedicated volunteers – a mix of school parents and retired locals.

"The volunteers love coming here," says Kelsey. "Some will pop in for half an hour and others stay for six hours. We just stand around the tables potting up plants and chatting. It's so enjoyable."

The nursery is now turning a tidy profit, and doing good

with it – donating \$40,000 to Wainuioru School in mid-2023, followed by another \$30,000 last season.

The funding has gone towards developing a Forest School, creating outdoor learning spaces, and supporting teacher aides in classrooms. The school also has a "green team" comprising students, a teacher and nursery members to support hands-on environmental education.

"The relationship between the school and the nursery is incredibly valuable," says Deputy Principal Kim Hill. "Not only has their support helped us shape meaningful learning experiences, but it has also strengthened the connection our children have with their environment."

The nursery's financial success has enabled it to employ two part-time staff, and to set aside a chunk of money for capital expenditure. In future, it plans to germinate its own seed, and to provide funding to other community groups besides the school.

Since its inception, the nursery has grown 140,000 native trees, and is on track to grow another 50,000 this year. Among the most popular species are tenax flax, pittosporums and grasses.

"Tenax flax is always a big seller to farmers – it soaks up lots of nutrients and likes waterlogged areas," Kelsey says. "Grasses have also been really good. We grew 30,000 grasses for a guy in Wellington last year for a planting site."

Some of the nursery's 30 different species can be turned around quickly. Others need a year or two of growing time before being planted out. The native species are all well adapted to New Zealand conditions, a fact which makes life easier for all the volunteers too. "Once they're in their pots and you're keeping on top of water, they're pretty good at looking after themselves," Kelsey says.

Growing native trees has been new territory for Kelsey, who had minimal gardening experience prior to establishing the nursery. A townie from Whangārei, she eschewed her initial plans of an arts degree after leaving school, and opted instead for a job in dairy farming. She met her husband after moving to Canterbury, and the pair now run a sheep and beef farm near Wainuioru, which they combine with raising a young family.

"I love my dahlias and I have a massive vege garden," Kelsey says. "But I'm not into gardens that need a lot of looking after."

With close to 50,000 budding native trees under her wing, that's probably no surprise. ■



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.