



GO LOCAL

Get your veges from small scale growers close to home.



Little Farms food boxes feature fresh produce from local farms. Above: Haylee Johnston (who works at the distribution centre) and Alex Morrissey with baby Mason Morrissey.

Former lawyer Alex Morrissey wants to change the Wairarapa's fresh food distribution system — one little farm at a time.

She is the driving force behind a collaborative network of 10 organic food growers and regenerative farms spread across the region which delivers seasonal fresh food boxes every week to about 150 customers in the Wairarapa and Wellington. These include hua parakore-certified Vagabond Vege in Greytown, BioGro-certified Te Manaia Organics in Masterton and spray-free Homewood Mara Kai in Riversdale.

The beauty of the network, known as Little Farms, is that everyone works together to decide what crops they will grow, based on their climate and farming systems. This means no one has to grow everything, there's always a good variety of produce available, and each farmer can specialise in what they grow well.

Orders are harvested and transported to a distribution centre in Masterton, where the boxes are packed before being hand delivered. Both subscription and one-off options are available.

"We're very focused on providing seasonal Wairarapa produce to Wairarapa locals," Alex says. "We always have greens like spinach and lettuce available, and we supplement these with other veges like leeks and beetroot in winter and fruit in summer."

One of the biggest challenges Little Farms has faced is the need to educate customers on the natural ups and downs of a seasonal food supply. "It's been surprising how many customers, even those in the older generation, don't understand that with seasonal gardening, not everything is available all the time," says Alex. "Unfortunately our supermarket system has taught people to expect that tomatoes, for example, are available every week of the year, even in winter."

To help overcome this, seasonal recipes are provided on the Little Farms website.

As well, workshops in no-dig gardening are available for those who want to try growing their own food.

Alex explains that potential customers have also needed some convincing that organic produce is not necessarily more expensive than buying from supermarkets. For example, in 2023, a national survey by Farmers' Market New Zealand and Eat NZ found that consumers could save

by buying their fresh fruit and veges at farmers markets. "It's crazy the way supermarkets transport food up and down the country," Alex says. "There is so much good food grown here in the Wairarapa, but previously it was impossible for locals to access it."

Once a commercial lawyer, Alex got into organic food growing after meeting her future husband and moving with him to the sheep and beef farm he manages in Pirinoa in south Wairarapa. She founded Little Farms with a friend in 2019, but now runs the network solo.

She splits her time between caring for her young family, supporting the Little Farms network, and growing veges for the seasonal boxes. "My job is to look at what everyone else is growing and fill in the gaps," she laughs. "At the moment I'm providing specialty items like jerusalem artichokes, herbs and yams."

As for the future, Little Farms is starting to think bigger. Alex and her fellow growers have recently launched a charitable trust called Where's the Food? (cheekily abbreviated to WTF?). Its mission is to build a resilient and equitable local food supply by safeguarding agricultural land, creating a Wairarapa Food Hub to distribute and sell local food, and providing mentoring, internships and training for local farmers.

"Events like Cyclone Gabrielle have really highlighted the need for local food resilience and self-sufficiency," Alex explains. "What motivates me is the desire to provide a better future for my children and our community by providing locally grown, organic food that is good for people and the planet."

Customers place their weekly orders on the Little Farms website, choosing between four different sized boxes, from "little" to "super-whānau". In addition, there are three specialty boxes: the keto box, a gardener's box for those who grow their own leafy greens, and an ugly box filled with "seconds" that are still tasty and nutritious. Pantry items such as meat, bread, eggs and honey are also available, thanks to Little Farms' expanding network of suppliers. Items in the boxes change from week to week, depending on what's available, and a pick-your-own option caters for customers who want to know exactly what they're getting. ■



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.