

Case Study: Growing a Grower's Group

Peer-to-peer learning is one of the most effective ways for growers to share knowledge, build confidence, and adapt to new challenges. By creating groups to talk openly with each other, growers often gain practical insights that are more trusted and useful than advice from outside sources. These groups also strengthen relationships across an industry, so that when new pests, diseases, or regulatory pressures arise, growers already have the networks and trust needed to respond together.

In the Nelson–Tasman region, the boysenberry industry has developed a regular discussion group that is now an important part of knowledge-sharing and coordination.

What is a grower group?

Grower groups (sometimes called peer-to-peer groups) are small groups of growers that meet regularly to share experiences, compare practices, connect. They build on the reality that grower's number one source of information is not from 'official' sources, but rather from their peers and neighbours. Sometimes these groups are led by growers themselves, and other times they are organised by others (for instance, product groups). Usually, there needs to be designated roles for organising and facilitating these groups.

Because they are relatively low-cost and easy to organise, grower groups offer excellent value for product groups when it comes to extension. By creating and fostering a regular, structured space for important conversations, product groups can deliver extension that feels relevant and practical. Instead of information being "pushed" onto growers, it emerges from their own priorities and experiences, which makes it more likely to be trusted and adopted.

The Nelson / Tasman Boysenberry Grower's Group

In the Nelson–Tasman region, the boysenberry industry is relatively small, with around 8 growers managing some 200 hectares in total. The crop is export-focused and runs on a short, intense growing season, with bud break in September and harvest packed into just a few weeks over December and January. To support connection and learning, Boysenberries NZ funds a grower group which has been operating for over ten years and brings together most of the region's commercial growers.

The group meets monthly throughout the growing season, rotating between growers' properties. Meetings are usually in a smoko shed or yard of one of the grower's farms, and are organised a week or so in advance by email or text. The flexibility of the meetings is important, as they need to fit in with growing schedules, weather patterns, and the busy lives of farmers. Each meeting follows a regular format, beginning with weather, updates from each grower, and an open discussion of issues, trials, or challenges. Sometimes external specialists join, and most meetings include visiting the crops.

The group is organised and facilitated by Jason Smith (Horteye), supported by funding from Boysenberries NZ. Jason works in pest and disease management and IPM, and has been involved in the boysenberry industry for over two decades.



Why the group works well

Although there has been no formal survey or evaluation of the boysenberry grower group, it's clear that it delivers value. The group has been running for more than ten years, with consistent turnout from most of the region's growers. As Jason puts it, *"If people are asking 'When's the next meeting' - that tells you it's working."*

Several factors contribute to its success

A clear and simple structure

Each meeting follows a familiar rhythm: a quick update on weather and growing degree days, an update of the month's activities from each grower, a discussion of topics at hand, and a visit to the plants. This routine signals that it's time to focus and ensures no one can just sit back.

"I find that you do need a bit of a structure and consistency - you want people to switch into the mode of 'we're having a meeting'."

The right facilitator

Having someone with good organisation and facilitation skills the group is crucial, and it's also useful if the facilitator has some experience with the crop. Jason's long history of involvement with boysenberries means it is easier to build trust with the group.

"I see them individually as well, so I can bring issues back to the group. And they know I'm not there to sell them anything. That trust makes a big difference."

Everyone contributes

When checking in and sharing updates, Jason makes a point of going around the group so that everyone has a turn to share, which enhances participation and buy-in. In addition, growers can send a text or email beforehand for Jason to introduce a topic on their behalf.

"Don't think you're going to turn up and not say anything - you will be asked to say what you've done. It makes sure people chip in, and it gives others confidence when they hear that their neighbours are making similar decisions."

Practical, on-farm learning


Meetings are always held on growers' properties, often in smoko sheds or out among the plants. This grounds discussions in real conditions and sparks conversations that wouldn't happen elsewhere:

"We don't tend to do PowerPoint presentations - it's not that sort of thing. It's a discussion."

Flexibility to respond to issues

While the format is consistent, the group adapts quickly when new problems arise. If there's a major issue, they will pull the group together for a special session; smaller issues are simply added to the next agenda.

"There's always flexibility. If there's a major issue, we'll pull the group together for that. Smaller things can just get added to the next meeting."



How to set up a Growers Group

The Nelson–Tasman Boysenberry Growers Group has a lot going for it: it's a small group of growers, the sector is not highly competitive, and there is a facilitator available with both technical expertise and strong industry connections. Other industries may not have all these advantages, so each group will look different. When setting up a grower group, you'll need to consider the following:



Find a good organiser and facilitator

Not everyone has these skills, but they can be learned, and they should be resourced properly. In Nelson–Tasman, Jason takes on both the organising and facilitation roles, but in other sectors these might be shared. What matters most is that someone is responsible for coordination and keeping the group moving.



Understand how adults learn

For growers to be motivated to attend, meetings need to be relevant and timely. Adults learn best when the content links directly to their real-life needs and goals. That can mean aligning meetings with seasonal milestones, as the boysenberry group does by meeting during the growing season. It also means creating a safe space where people feel comfortable sharing their experiences and challenges. You can learn about adult learning principles here.



Recognise the life cycle of a group

Groups don't just appear fully formed: they move through stages of connecting, forming, running, sustaining, and eventually closing. Each stage requires different kinds of support. The Boysenberry group is well established, but a new group will need attention to the early phases: how to connect people, establish trust, and build a base.



Connect with resources

There is no need to start from scratch: there are a number of resources to aid in developing grower groups. For instance, the [Queensland DPI Peer-to-Peer Startup Kit](#) provides useful guidance on each stage of putting together a group. Tapping into existing knowledge can save time and strengthen new initiatives.



Credit: Boysenberries NZ



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Extension planning

Resources designed to guide you through creating and documenting your extension plan include a guide to both extension planning, and setting goals and objectives, a video on the theory of change and more.

Monitoring and evaluation

Three monitoring and evaluation (M & E) resources will get you started on tracking how well your plan is being implemented and it's impact and outcomes. You'll find an M & E overview, question bank and guide to building a survey.



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