APEN members practising and enriching their extension skills

Connecting the dots: what study tours reveal about the value of knowledge exchange



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Study tours are an effective tool extension professionals have for building the trust and confidence growers need to change practice on their own farm. Two recent study tours, one to New Zealand and one to the UK, show just how far that value can stretch and how often the dots end up connecting back to each other in unexpected ways.

Visiting Pukekohe, New Zealand

VegNET Tasmania's Growing Regeneratively program kicked off in April 2026, a 12-month program for Tasmanian vegetable and onion growers and agronomists, combining on-farm learning, study tours, and sessions with interstate and international experts. The aim is a practical one: to help build growers' confidence to test and adopt regenerative approaches in Tasmanian vegetable production systems, with a local peer group to share the experience along the way.

Running in parallel with the program, four of its participating growers and advisors joined a broader VegNET study tour to New Zealand from 12 to 18 July, travelling between Auckland and Napier on the North Island and spending several days in Pukekohe, one of New Zealand's key vegetable-growing regions. The tour took in a wide range of vegetable farms, kiwifruit and apple orchards, and research farms and institutions.

While at a research farm in Pukekohe, the group met with Daniel Sutton, Vegetables NZ's Research, Development and Extension Manager, who talked them through an IPM workshop series that Vegetables NZ, as part of the A Lighter Touch programme, has been running on site at the Te Ahikawariki Vegetable Industry Centre of Excellence. The research farm is also home to a simple but effective piece of IPM infrastructure: the moveable insectary pods, made from IBC containers cut in half, filled with soil and planted with a mix of beneficial-attracting flowers, with insect hotels added to the side.



IMAGE: Tasmanian growers and agronomists on the NZ study tour to The Fresh Grower, Pukekohe

The dots connect to the UK

Those insectary pods, it turns out, had already made their way to the other side of the world. In late 2025, Megan-Rose Beard (G's Fresh Technical Agronomist for celery and organics) and Lucy Harler (G's Future Farming Manager) travelled from the UK to visit Australian and New Zealand growers. That visit set up a return trip: VegNET Tasmania Regional Development Officer Tayla Field and Harvest Moon Crop Manager Dylan Bellchambers later travelled to the UK to see G's Fresh's regenerative and integrated pest management (IPM) practices firsthand before joining the VegMech Project study tour run by the Queensland DPI.

On that visit, Tayla and Dylan saw G's IPM approach in action, from breeding populations of grain aphids on barley in a central poly tunnel to help host beneficial insects, through to insectary flowering strips and moveable insectary pods trialled on the property, the same design Meg had first seen at Te Ahikawariki in Pukekohe in late 2025. The same idea, it turned out, had come from New Zealand in the first place, and Tayla would see its source for herself a few weeks later on the study tour to NZ.





IMAGES: G's Fresh insectary pods and IPM in action, UK

For extension purposes

- The pairing of a structured local program with an immersive study tour is a useful model.

- A 12-month program gives growers a local support structure to return to and test ideas against over time.
- A concentrated, wide-ranging study tour delivers exposure to other regions and sectors that a single farm visit at home simply can't replicate.
- As this case shows, it sometimes closes a loop that started somewhere else entirely.

Sustained engagement closer to the ground

Back in Pukekohe, the IPM workshop series Daniel Sutton described to the group is itself a good example of engagement playing out over the long term. The workshops follow a single crop, such as lettuce, from planting through to harvest, pairing an outdoor crop-monitoring session with a classroom session to review findings and trends and make management decisions as a group as the crop progresses.

The series has now run across multiple seasons, drawing around 20 growers, agronomists and crop advisors each time. That kind of repeat attendance is worth paying attention to. It isn't a single field day generating short-lived interest, but a standing invitation for people to return, watch a crop through to the end, and build their own confidence in reading pest pressure and IPM outcomes over a full season without taking the risk on their own farm. For the growers, the value builds with each return visit, not just the first one.

The common thread

Across all three examples, a reciprocal grower-to-grower relationship spanning hemispheres, a structured program paired with an immersive study tour, and a demonstration-farm workshop series people keep coming back to, the common thread is the same. None of them rely on a single moment of information transfer. They're built around return visits, shared experience, and enough repetition and connection for growers and advisors to genuinely bring their own experiences to share.

For extension professionals, that's arguably the real lesson: the technical content matters, but it's the web of exchange built around it, and the willingness to follow where the dots lead, that determines whether it sticks. Regards, Tayla