

A tree grower in the Land of the Long White Cloud¹

Peter Thurman with Barney Harrison

Earlier this year, I spent 14 weeks travelling around New Zealand, Tasmania and a small part of mainland Australia.

I visited many wonderful places and managed to see lots of plants, gardens, arboreta, natural forests – and some interesting plant nurseries. The latter included one I was invited to visit by its Sales and Marketing Director, Barney Harrison, whom I had got to know through social media.

Easy Big Trees is located at the very bottom of the South Island of New Zealand near the city of Invercargill. Sadly, Barney had to go out on the day I turned up which we both regretted. But in subsequent emails we agreed that a Q&A session could make an interesting article.

Background

Easy Big Trees is the largest big tree supplier in the South Island of New Zealand with currently over 130,000 trees and shrubs in stock. Owners Chris, Barney and Ryland Harrison are third and fourth generation nurserymen with over 100 years of industry experience and knowledge.

I was extremely impressed with the nursery – especially the range of stock and the sizes available that include species native and exotic to Europe, the Americas, Australia

and, of course, New Zealand itself. Some species would be considered great rarities in Europe; others are not available at all.

The range of stock is carefully selected for hardiness and vigour, ensuring the ability to thrive in a wide range of exposed and diverse growing conditions. I was surprised to see how many British natives were grown at the nursery and especially to learn how popular *Quercus robur* is in New Zealand. It does grow well there, and I saw some wonderful specimens in many parks and gardens.

Peter Thurman (PT): Barney, how did it all start?

Barney Harrison (BH): The Easy Big Trees story starts back in 1918 when Great Grandpa Richmond (Harrison) started growing native shelterbelts for farmers in the Manawatu.² This grew into a business (named Harrisons Nursery) of around 80 employees in 1970 supplying a range of product from bulbs and herbaceous plants to fruit trees and ornamental trees. A mail order catalogue service enabled NZ-wide delivery.

PT: Describe the set-up now

BH: Today, Easy Big Trees is managed by

Chris and his two sons: myself and Ryland. Staff numbers fluctuate from 15 to 20 depending on the season, and currently we have 30–35 acres of container-grown stock and another 30 acres of in-field stock. We specialise in large specimen trees, both natives and exotics, but also sell these in smaller sizes together with shrubs, screening and hedging plants, topiary and pleached specimens and some fruit and nut species.

Our 'Big Tree' range in bags starts at 25 litres, through the low hundreds and right up to 2,000 and 5,000-litre containers. But we also sell trees in smaller 12- to 35-litre bags, and shrubs, topiary and hedging in 8- to 80-litre sizes.

PT: Briefly describe your growing/ containerization methods

BH: For containerisation, we currently use specialised root pouch containers made of recycled cotton and polyester for most of our 8- to 80-litre containers, which has proven benefits for growing superior root systems. We do also use plastic pots for smaller products (8–12 litre) and woven acrylic containers with handles for our 35- to 2000-litre containers.

Our stock is made up of a mixture of bought-in young plants grown on and we also propagate some species ourselves. The irrigation system is made up of slow-release drippers for containers and sprinklers for smaller stock – all fed by an on-site water bore system. Our compost is currently a mix of bark and locally-sourced peat, which is natural and with an exceptionally low carbon outlay for us. We vary the percentage of bark to peat in the mix according to the species.

PT: I think readers would be interested to know why you are not considering air-pots for containers.

BH: Our breathable woven bags are strong and the trees do well in them, especially the root pouch container (even better than the air pot?). We may consider the wrap-around air pots for larger containers in the future – 500 litres and larger – as they do make it easier to unclip, reuse and re-containerise. Other than that, we find that the existing containers we use create strong plants with excellent root systems.

PT: Tell us about the Heritage Collection of Trees that you promote.

BH: Our Heritage Collection range is our specially curated and cared for 10–25+ year old trees in 200- to 5,000-litre containers to provide instant aesthetics and value to our

1. Aotearoa, the Māori name for New Zealand, is often translated as 'Land of the Long White Cloud'. The name was originally used to refer to the North Island only, with the whole country being called Aotearoa me Te Waipounamu.

2. A region in the lower half of the North Island of New Zealand.

Aerial view of the Easy Big Tree nursery. (Easy Big Trees – EBT)





Barney Harrison. (EBT)

clients' properties. These consist mainly of beautiful older English trees to complement and add value to any landscape. We have planted over 20 acres of trees in the ground here at the nursery for future Heritage Collection supply.

PT: Give us an idea of prices!

BH: We have both a retail and wholesale scale of prices – the difference is about 20–25%. For example, our 35–45-litre trees that are 5–6 years old sell for between \$NZ145–225³ plus 15% goods and services tax [GST] or \$NZ225–285 including GST. Our 80-litre trees, usually 8 years old and over 3 m in height, trade for our around \$NZ345–425 plus GST (retail \$NZ465–585 inc. GST). The most prestigious trees in our Heritage Collection range, in 2000-litre and 5000-litre containers and over 20 years old, retail at anywhere between \$NZ12,000 and \$NZ20,000+ (including GST).

PT: What is your customer base – who buys from you?

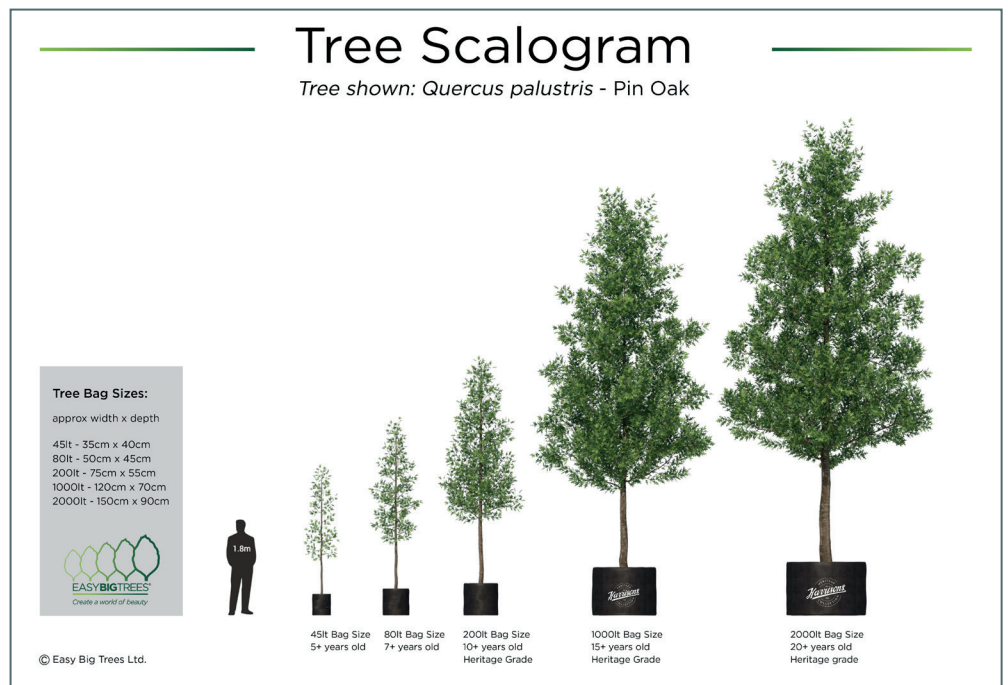
BH: We are both a retail and wholesale supplier, but our trade base is the strongest part of the business. Clients include domestic and commercial customers including schools, councils, estates and golf courses – as well as professionals such as developers, builders, contractors, landscape architects and architects. Our South Island business is considerable, but we have plenty of customers in the North Island as well, which has a much higher population.⁴

PT: Ever thought of having a North Island subsidy/franchise?

BH: Not at this stage. Our growing conditions here in the deep south create trees that are well set up to thrive throughout NZ. This is not always the case



Trees supplied by Easy Big Trees for a large country estate in the foothills of Hanmer Springs, further north in the South Island. (EBT)



EBT's tree size and age scale chart for customers.

with plants produced in the North Island.

PT: How are deliveries organised?

BH: We partner with local, committed transport companies who do a wonderful job and are specialised tree carriers and dedicated to carting and caring for our products NZ wide. We deliver weekly to the North Island in the planting season.

PT: Any serious pests and diseases you must be vigilant about?

BH: There have been issues with myrtle rust (*Austropuccinia psidii*) in the North Island in recent years but generally, our cooler climate in the south is good at keeping out pathogens which tend to do better in warmer climates. We do take precautionary

measures for any stock coming to the nursery and keep a close watch on our growing crops. For myrtle rust, monitoring, hygiene and stock-moving controls to the south are in place. We use organic sprays to help encourage good plant health and maintain nature's natural balances.

PT: You sell various elm varieties, but I have noticed Dutch elm disease (DED) in New Zealand.

BH: It is only a problem in and around Auckland in the North Island and the only sale restrictions are in that area. But all the elm types we grow (e.g. 'Lobel', 'Dodens', 'Frontier' etc.) are resistant to the disease. Just as well, as these are some of our best performing trees for any project NZ-wide –

3. 1\$NZ = £0.47 (22nd September 2024), so prices shown are approximately halved if converting into UK £s.

4. The population of NZ is split 3.5 million in the North Island, 1.5m in the South Island.



Lophozonia (previously *Nothofagus*) *menziesii*, the native tawhai or silver beech, in 200-litre bags and around 4 m tall – very surprising to see as in Europe, the mantra is to plant this group much younger! (Peter Thurman)



Alnus jorullensis, the Mexican alder, is grown by EBT, although it is neglected and almost forgotten about in Europe. It was introduced into Britain in 1980 but after a few failures it seems to have been written off. (Wilmien Brascamp)



Ulmus glabra 'Pendula' in a 5,000-litre bag. (EBT)

from the tough inland conditions of Central Otago to the windy coastal areas in both islands.

PT: Down here at the bottom of the South Island, how is climate change affecting you?

BH: We are finding the weather is less predictable and flooding more prevalent. Fortunately, we are some way from the nearest flood plain and have a good drainage system on site. Hotter summers and warmer winters on the nursery increase mite and aphid activity and we use organic sprays to control these. But at the moment, Southland NZ, with its regular rainfall and cooler overall temperatures, remains a great place to grow trees.

I guess the Earth has always had cyclic climatic conditions and nature is very resilient and adaptable to change. I think there is a great awareness that planting trees and looking after what we have are important. And New Zealand is fully aware of the power of nature! We are regularly reminded by volcanic eruptions and earthquakes! New Zealand has about 14,000 earthquakes in and around the country each year, of which between 150 and 200 are big enough to be felt!

PT: Do you get any subsidies/grants/funding from the NZ government or local government?

BH: No, nothing. We pay full rates for water and energy and all plants are taxed including food plants. During the Covid period there was some upskilling course subsidies available at management level to NZ businesses. That is all.

PT: Is it easy to get trained staff? Are the colleges training people you can employ?

BH: It is becoming harder to find team members with horticulture and tree knowledge. But we feel a good smile and positive mindset are our key crew member starting qualities. We offer and provide both in-house and external training courses for sales and product training to our team including professional one-to-one coaching for our management team.

PT: Do you offer a planting and aftercare service?

BH: We offer as much product knowledge at point of sale as we can in tree knowledge, planting and after care but recommend partnering with landscape and gardening professionals for ongoing care and maintenance. Our guides are in PDF format, and we are also working on a video series.



Ulmus 'Frontier', an *U. minor*/*U. parvifolia* cross made by the US National Arboretum in 1971 and released in 1990. Considered disease resistant and available in the UK but not often seen. Photographed in March, autumn in NZ. (Peter Thurman)

PT: Any preferences for support systems when planting?

BH: The below ground anchor/guying systems are definitely the way to go for the larger trees.

PT: What are your best-selling species at the moment?

BH: It varies a little from year to year, but *Liquidambar* and *Quercus* continue to be strong favourites.

PT: What is the demand for native species? What percentage of your sales are natives?

BH: Again, it does depend on the season, but it would be close to 50/50.

PT: Are there any species that you think should be planted more – perhaps lesser-known types with great potential that you are keen to promote?

BH: *Parrotia persica* has become a recent favourite here with its stunning form, autumn colour and hardiness. *Zelkova serrata* and *Amelanchier* are also beautiful and hardy trees that could be more widely planted.

PT: What are your personal favourites?

BH: Again, *Parrotia persica* would have to be a close one. Another is our native beech, particularly *Nothofagus menziesii* (recently renamed *Lophozonia*). Its dark black trunk

with fine silver horizontal lines and green foliage do make it a neat tree.

PT: What are your aims and predictions for the future?

BH: With regards to planting design, we want to visit the UK and Europe for that! Multi-stem trees are growing in favour, and there's still a great market for quality deciduous trees and hedging. You might think we should be exploring the market potential of Australia, but the laws are too restrictive at this point in time. Our core aim and focus will always be to grow a high-quality product. It's what we do best!

Further reading

Easy Big Trees website, www.easybigtrees.co.nz/

Myrtle Rust, www.myrtlerust.org.nz/

Nothofagus menziesii, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nothofagus_menziesii

NZ Plant Producers Incorporated, www.nzppi.co.nz/

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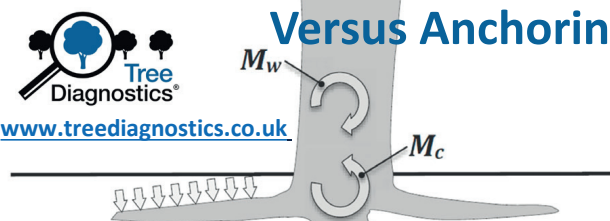
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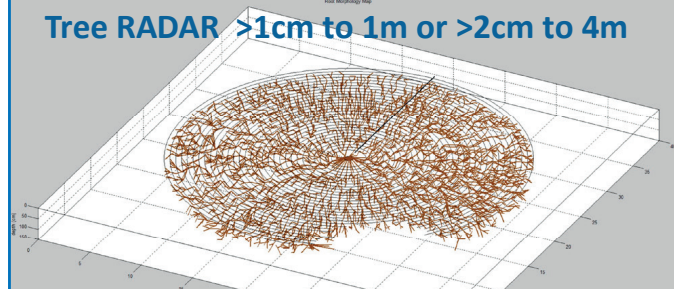
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