

Reg Miller Award 2007

Don Fawkner

Recently retired after three and a half decades working as a key member of the onion industry at all levels, Don Fawkner has made significant contributions to the industry, particularly in Tasmania.

Don originally worked for Clements and Marshall Pty Ltd, who commenced growing onions in the early 1970s and continued until the major onion exporters formed Field Fresh Tasmania in July 1997.

Clements and Marshall were the first Tasmanian onion exporter to ship onions overseas. These onions were sourced from Victoria and shipped in reefer containers, and Don was responsible for sourcing the onions. A successful export industry was soon established from Tasmania. Don was heavily involved in the development of the Fantainer, which is still the major form of product transport for the onion industry.

Don was in charge of the Clements and Marshall onion operation responsible for ground selection, contracts, agronomy, harvesting and packing. During his latter years with Clements and Marshall, Don ventured into seed breeding under the watchful eye of his good friend Peter Ryan from May and Ryan. Don was obviously a good student and really took to this side of the business.

He continued with Field Fresh Tasmania, taking over their seed breeding program. It was Don's drive and enthusiasm that led to a dramatic improvement in seed quality.

NZ Creamgold onions were a major seedline used. Recognising the differences between Tasmanian and NZ climate and soils, Don worked closely with Peter Ryan to select onion lines which were suited to Tasmanian conditions.

Don spent a lot of time grading seed bulbs to alleviate one problem related to bulbs becoming elongated.

He took a particular interest in developing onion seed lines with a vigorous root system suited to Tasmania's northern midlands (the area south of Devonport) which required different attributes to the onions grown on the deep red Kraznozem soils along Tasmania's north-west coast. Most of the seed used by Webster Fresh (Australia's largest onion exporter) is derived from Don's selections. He also produced his own line of red onion seed, which is now the only red on-



ion seed planted by Field Fresh.

Don made a significant contribution to the development of management strategies for onion white rot and Botrytis neck rot in Tasmania in the late 1990s as a member of the Onion Panel's technical committee. The onion industry would have been crippled without these two strategies, which have allowed onion production to continue.

Don acted as a mentor to young people entering the industry on many occasions. He was always open to experimenting with new ideas. He often would call DPIWE's plant pathologists when he noted something unusual in a crop, and a joint investigation would be conducted. Don's experience combined with the scientific expertise of others to unravel many production problems—this was always a very beneficial learning experience for the scientists involved.

When Field Fresh Tasmania formed in 1997 following an epidemic of Botrytis which had badly hurt the industry, it was noted that the crops under Don's care had suffered the least. Don had been avoiding use of leaf wetteners in crop sprays. Other field officers noted this and all minimised the use of wetteners. Scientists have since followed up on this observation and have found that wetteners can injure leaf waxes, which encourages foliar diseases. This was a significant step in making neck rot more manageable.

In his retirement, Don continues to work as a consultant, ensuring his knowledge and expertise will continue to benefit us all in the industry.

—By Dean Metcalf, with input
from Robyn Bergersen and Alan Carey