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## Fresh strawberries in the off-season

Timaru Herald, Timaru Canterbury

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**In Foxton, a spray-free strawberry farm is growing indoors when traditional farms cannot. Gerhard Uys reports.**

New Zealand-grown fresh strawberries in winter might sound too good to be true, but one indoor vertical strawberry farm owner says he has the solution.

Matthew Keltie, a co-founder of indoor farming firm 26 Seasons, said the vertical farm in Foxton, Manawatū-Whanganui, has been selling strawberries since July.

The business planned to keep selling until November this year, which meant it would be supplying the market with fresh strawberries during a time when New Zealand normally relied on imports, Keltie said.

The farm was one of a few worldwide that managed to grow indoor strawberries, Keltie said.

Selling only during the off-season would mean it did not compete with local farmers during the growing season but could still help New Zealand reduce reliance on imports, Keltie said.

Data from the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations shows that between 2018 and 2020, New Zealand imported 544 tonnes of strawberries every year.

At 1350m<sup>2</sup>, 26 Seasons' site is capable of growing a million punnets of strawberries annually.

It could house up to 60,000 plants, Keltie said. Strawberries were grown in a full hydroponic system with no soils, under a hi-tech lighting system. The plants were fed a nutrient solution that was specific to their lifecycle and changed as the plant matured.

The system was fully enclosed and there were no nutrients leaching into waterways, Keltie said.

The system allowed water to be recycled, with about 95% less water used than on an outdoor farm. Because there was no soil,

there was also no erosion.

Bees were still used as pollinators, Keltie said. Beneficial insects that ate pest insects were also brought onto the site. This meant no agricultural chemicals were needed to control pests.

Keltie said it was important that more types of vegetables and fruits were grown indoors than what was currently available from indoor farms.

"Food supply resilience is becoming increasingly important. We've seen how global events, climate change and severe weather events can disrupt the consistent supply of fresh food."

A controlled indoor environment eliminated external factors such as seasons, climate and pests, he said. It also gave growers the ability to grow quality product with high yields year-round.

The company was working with Plant & Food Research and Venture Fruit to see if it could sustainably grow other fruits and

vegetables, besides strawberries and microgreens, Keltie said.

26 Seasons aimed to supply up to six supermarkets plus a handful of select restaurants in the next couple of months, Keltie said.

The company would also target export markets where there was a

known year-round demand for strawberries, in regions where high humidity made strawberries tricky to grow on traditional farms, Keltie said.

It had a pilot programme in Singapore and a 100,000-plant-capacity site in Southeast Asia.



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Matthew Keltie, of 26 Seasons, says it is important that technology is developed to grow more fruits and veges indoors.