



PART ONE

1978-2000

CELEBRATING

40

YEARS

OF THE  
AUSTRALIAN BLUEBERRY  
GROWERS ASSOCIATION



BY JANE RICHTER



The book 'Blueberry Culture' by Paul Eck & Norman Childers, first published in 1967 and updated in 2006, is still considered one of the premier texts about blueberry cultivation.

There is some confusion as to when and how the very first blueberry bush came to Australia. Some reports have blueberries growing in Tasmania at the turn of the 20th century, presumably brought from the United States. In a 1982 report penned by Ridley Bell, he notes that highbush blueberry varieties had been introduced into Victoria in the 1960's, however these plants had been discarded because of suspected disease problems. He goes on to describe how seeds from the breeding lines in the United States were imported in 1969 by David Jones, from the Horticultural Research Institute (Knoxfield), sourced from Dr Stanley Johnson, University of Michigan, and used as part of an Australian breeding program.

These seeds were grown up by Karel Kroon and Ridley Bell at Knoxfield and this eventually led to the Knoxfield series first released to propagators and nurseries in 1976. The first 15 selections in the Knoxfield series were all named after ladies of the era – the most famous of which, and one which is still widely grown today in the southern states and overseas, is 'Brigitta', and would you believe it was named after Dr Brian McCluskey's Bank Manager's wife!

Rewind four years to 1974, when Margaret and John Tucker bought a piece of land at Caveat in central Victoria, not far from the small country town of Yarck. They wanted to farm the land, but the question was what to farm there? A year or two passed and the Tuckers were referred to the local horticultural branch of the state department of agriculture and visited the local research station at Knoxfield to get some ideas. Fortuitously, the department had just received some blueberry seeds from the United States and Margaret came back from that meeting "hooked on blueberries and remained hooked on blueberries for life". It was in these very early years that Karel Kroon from Knoxfield spent many a day up at the property with the Tuckers.

On Wednesday 9th June 1976, John and Margaret Tucker left their property and journeyed to the United States to research this wonder berry for themselves. They toured the major growing regions and encountered a prominent scientist named Dr Paul Eck. Margaret and Paul became very firm friends and when Margaret returned to Australia on Friday 16th July 1976, she was determined to build a blueberry industry to be proud of in Australia. Upon their return, Margaret was horrified to find that the bushes they had planted from the US stocks had been burnt by a root fungus - Armillaria - local to the area and were essentially dead. Entries from Margaret's diary at the time show that she was undeterred by this setback.

Ridley Bell had come to the Horticultural Research Institute at Knoxfield in 1975 as a scientific officer. Ridley was a part of the team who raised and assessed multiple sets of seed-reared bushes and from that initial work came the Knoxfield series. Other participants included David Jones, Graham Barthold and other senior staff at both the Department of Agriculture and the Knoxfield farm like Karel Kroon.

### THE UNKNOWN BERRY

In 1976, Ridley Bell visited the Footscray markets in Melbourne with 12 trays of fresh blueberries in 450g punnets from the trial bushes at Knoxfield. Not one market trader had a clue what on earth they were! Today would be a very different story.



The Horticultural Research Institute at Knoxfield started life as the Scoresby Horticultural Research Station in 1950 to undertake research into fruits and ornamentals. Sadly, today the site is about to become home to 400 high density dwellings as part of the redevelopment of the Knox City area.

1. MARGARET & JOHN TUCKER
2. HORTICULTURAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE AT KNOXFIELD, VIC
3. RIDLEY BELL

# 1978-1989

## THE BIRTH OF AN INDUSTRY & ITS ASSOCIATION

In those early years, there was difficulty in getting plants propagated for commercial production as most fruit nurserymen just weren't interested, so Ridley had to get a range of people outside horticulture to take on the job. Notes provided for this story detail some interesting characters getting involved at this point – a surgeon named Dr McCluskey (yes the same Dr McCluskey with the Bank Manager) as well as brothers Mick and Geoff Joy. Other willing propagating pioneers included Alex Hodge and Paul and Joy Orr.

Further extracts from Margaret's diaries at the time show that she certainly was actively receiving and planting plants from 1976 to 1978. She picked up blueberries on Monday 22nd November 1976 and Friday 5th August 1977, and entered on St Patrick's Day 17th March 1978 is the first record of a blueberry growers meeting, held at 2 Kembla Street Hawthorn in Melbourne's inner east – the Tuckers' family home at the time. Just two short months later, on Tuesday 9th May 1978, the group met again, but this time the diary entry is titled 'Blue Berry Assn. 5.30pm meeting'. The people present at that very first meeting around the Tuckers' kitchen table were Margaret and John Tucker, David Swanson, Alex Hodge, David Crawford, Karel Kroon, John MacDonald, Mick Joy and Ridley Bell.

I THINK IT IS SAFE TO DECLARE THIS AS THE START OF THE AUSTRALIAN BLUEBERRY GROWERS ASSOCIATION AS WE KNOW IT TODAY.

In the very early days after the Tuckers' first visit to the United States, Paul Eck offered his assistance to the Horticultural Research Institute at Knoxfield but was politely declined due to a lack of funds available to pay for his travel expenses. Determined to help Australian blueberry growers succeed, Margaret formed the association and invited interested growers to pay an annual subscription, the proceeds of which funded the first visit to Australia by Paul Eck in August 1978. Notes found in Margaret's records from those early days show a balance of \$796.00 in the trust account, a healthy fighting fund for the late 1970's. During that visit in August 1978, Paul attended the International Horticultural Congress being held in Melbourne and then spent time visiting farms and holding field days across Victoria and in Tasmania too.

Hand written minutes, in a beautiful formal cursive script that we so rarely see today, recorded the goings-on at an association meeting held a year later on Monday 9th April, 1979 at 8pm, again in the Tuckers' Hawthorn home. The agenda included short reports of activities during the previous year, a financial report, a talk by Ridley Bell on his recent trip to New Zealand, the election of committee members and associated office bearers as well as 'Paul Eck' as an item attached to 'Any other business'. At the inception of the association in 1978, Margaret had taken up the acting-Secretary role with her husband John filling the interim-President position.



AN EARLY ABGA LOGO

Karel gives us a motto – "E.Q.F." – Education, Quality and Flavor.

- |           |  |
|-----------|--|
| EDUCATION | - Recipes should be supplied with the fruit and consumers must be educated.  |
| QUALITY   | - Uniform quality can only be achieved through one organisation. Let no Blueberry Grower escape, says Karel, they must all join or affiliate with the A.B.G.A. |
| FLAVOR    | - Growers concentrating on the fresh fruit will find flavor is very important.   |

KAREL'S WISE ADVICE REMAINS JUST AS TRUE TODAY



The notes reveal that she was actively encouraging the participation of others; *‘new faces and personalities are good for a committee and show a healthy interest’*. In that first year of operating there were at least ten other families involved in the association; names listed include Schultz, Adams, McKay, Raymond, O'Neill, Corbett, Etheridge, Kroll and Shannon from locations around Victoria including Healesville, Wandin and Hoddles Creek.

In the late 1970's, Ridley started making connections with Prof Mike Mainland from North Carolina University, Prof Max Austin from the University of Georgia and Dr Jim Spiers at the University of Mississippi. Through this network he was able to start bringing in varieties suited to different climates. One person who became incredibly important to the fledgling industry was Professor Paul Irene from the University of Florida at Gainesville. He was running a breeding program in Florida focussing on warmer climate varieties, and it was his breeding programme that would go on to supply much of the varietal diversity now found in the warmer climate region of northern NSW.

In parallel with the seed raising activities, some established varieties were imported from the United States and put through a two-year quarantine process before being made available to growers in the fledgling industry. It was 1978 when Dr Brian Fletcher from the NSW Department of Agriculture brought in the very first low chill varieties – Sharp Blue and Florida Blue – and one plant of each were provided to Ridley in Victoria, as well as a small selection of nurseries.

At least five acres of blueberry seedlings were planted by the Tuckers at Caveat with the help of Knoxfield and after a couple of years the Tuckers were propagating and selling bushes themselves. In 1980, the Caveat property was sold and Margaret & John moved the farm to a fifty acre site at Drysdale where Tuckerberry Farm still operates today, under the careful stewardship of Margaret & John's daughter Christine and her husband David.

Mal Deveson had a farm in Gippsland and was running cattle when he went looking for something that he could do more intensively on his 160 acres. Ridley Bell by this point had spent time in both the United States and New Zealand studying the blueberry industry and was working at Knoxfield. Mal was invited by a local extension officer to attend a presentation delivered by Ridley in Warrigul and so began another love affair with the humble blueberry. In 1980, Mal started a living blueberry museum on his property as well as his commercial orchard and this has proven very useful in the breeding plans across the decades and still exists today with plants growing there with their roots in the very early days.

There were a number of other key people who must be acknowledged for their tremendous contribution – the industry was indeed a team effort. **Graeme Frith** was the Director at Knoxfield through this period and **Karel Kroon** was another enthusiastic proponent of the budding berry bushes. In these very early stages it is fair to say that the industry consisted mainly of hobby farmers with little knowledge of the complexity of blueberry growing, but with plenty of passion for finding out. Other names that feature from that time are **Graham Barthold**, **Jim Addison**, **Rod Kefferd**, **Dick Cohen** and **David Swanson**. David was one of the founding members of the ABGA, but sadly died prematurely. Dick Cohen was an early President in the association as was **Barry Megee** and **Stuart Dobson**.

Industry volume through the late 1970's to early 1980's came in a two month harvest window and amounted to approximately 70 tonnes of fresh fruit, all sold on the domestic market.

In 1980, Paul Eck came back to Australia and stayed for a year-long sabbatical to study blueberry adaptation to different soil types in Victoria. He had written Blueberry Culture in the late 1960's and this was the virtual 'bible' for blueberry growing at the time. Ridley and his friend Ross Burgess went on a voyage of discovery across the United States in June 1981 for a whole month; paradoxically from the same experience Ridley came back utterly energised about the future potential of the blueberry industry for Australia and Ross came back with the completely opposite state of mind!

Later in 1981, Ridley Bell left Knoxfield and moved to Northern NSW as he saw the future for the industry being in warmer climates on the supply shoulder between the Chile and South Africa seasons. His successor at Knoxfield, Dr Kevin Clayton-Greene continued the great work done by Ridley at Knoxfield in supporting the young blueberry industry and he stayed until the blueberry research program was closed by the state government in the late 1980s. Kevin, along with Dr Doris Blaesing, developed the protocols for the post-harvest treatment and storage of blueberries which are still widely used by the industry today.

In 1982, Ridley produced a report for the industry which highlighted 'The Economics of Blueberry Growing', although I imagine these numbers now need another zero added to them and Ridley certainly wouldn't want to be held to these numbers nowadays!

THE ECONOMICS OF BLUEBERRY GROWING		
Recent publicity has led people into the unrealistic apprehension that they will be able to earn from \$30,000 to \$100,000 per hectare, and some people are basing their life's future on such loose economics.		
CAPITAL COSTS		
		variable
Land/costs		\$18,000 – \$20,000
Cool room/work shed		\$15,000
Water/irrigation		\$15,000 – \$18,000
Machinery		\$12,000
Vehicles		\$25,000 – \$30,000
Plants		\$5,000
Sundry items		
Total approximately		\$95,000 – \$100,000 + land
ANNUAL OPERATING COSTS		
Fuel/power	\$1,800	
Sprays/fertilisers	\$1,500	
Machinery maintenance	\$1,000	
Vehicle reg./insurance	\$1,000	
Rates/telephone/incidentals.	\$2,200	
(Average)	\$2,200	+ interest on loans and living expenses.
Picking/packing costs	\$1.40/kg	

EXTRACTED FROM 1982 REPORT FROM RIDLEY BELL  
"THE ECONOMICS OF BLUEBERRY GROWING"

In 1980, Frank Edlinger started a farm named Avonsleigh Berries in Victoria with his first field of blueberries planted in 1982 (nicknamed the 'old' field) and a second paddock planted in 1985 (a.k.a the 'new' field). The farm is still operated to this day by the next generation, Martine and Harold Edlinger, and has plantings of sour cherries to complement the blueberry seasonality.

There were lots of field days during the eighties, with a strong sense of camaraderie in the industry and the optimism of a group of growers with a crop that was going places. The ABGA membership was 20 or so growers – mostly in Victoria with one in South Australia and a couple in Tasmania.

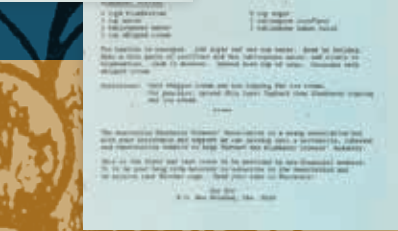
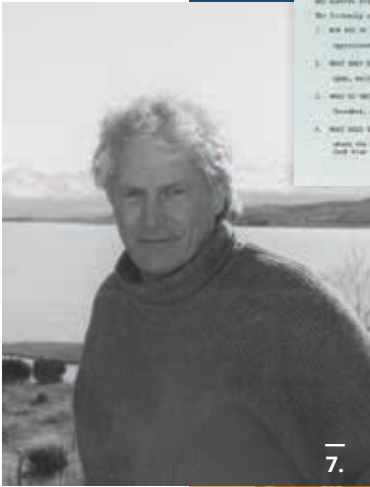
In 1982, another milestone in the industry saw the development of a joint marketing initiative for blueberries. With the help of Shaun Keenan from Horticultural Holdings, an expert export marketer at the time, and others from Knoxfield a common packaging was developed with an accompanying marketing plan in each capital city central market. Only one or two agents were selected to market the fruit and the packaging came with a rather unique fold-out style of recipe leaflet to help people to understand what to do with a blueberry! Margaret started a newsletter to share information within the industry and this was taken over by Ridley after he had moved to northern NSW. It was highly informative and covered several photocopied sheets in those early days. That newsletter was the very early predecessor of this industry journal that you are reading today.

The joint marketing initiative held together for a year or two, but as more growers came into the industry and volumes grew, it wasn't long before Australian blueberries were being exported far and wide, mostly through the AUSFresh business belonging to Shaun Keenan.

Stuart Dobson started The Big Berry at Hoddles Creek which became the largest blueberry farm in Victoria. And Stuart was even President of the Association for a while. He later sold the farm to Paul Casey and moved to Western Australia to grow other things.

The industry in northern NSW kicked off with the development of low chill varieties. The Johnson brothers came to Corindi Beach in the early eighties and planted a large cluster farm operating under what may well have been the first managed investment scheme in Australian Horticulture. They bought land, sub-divided it and sold off individual plots to investors, and then managed the whole area as a farming operation generating returns back to each investor. By the late eighties, NSW was growing the lion's share of the industry volume, but the ABGA was still really a southern association with limited engagement by the NSW growers. In 1986, a number of the cluster farm owners formed a cooperative with Peter McPherson as Business Manager and Gary Wright as Horticultural Manager. Peter went on to serve as ABGA Treasurer for many years and is the current President of the association, and a guiding force for the industry still today.

Struggling for decent varieties for low chill varieties, in 1992 Gary Wright and Ridley Bell flew to the University of Florida and met with Prof Paul Irene. Due to a lack of support from US growers, the breeding programme there was just about to close down. Fortuitously Ridley and Gary were able to forge an agreement with Paul that has seen a continuous flow of the best breeding outcomes from the continuing programme make their way to Australia each year since. Australia was very fortunate in the 1990's not to have the disease Blueberry Rust. As a result, in Australia we could grow the bushes as evergreens; a practice that nowhere else in the world could achieve at this time. Ridley and Gary created a system called 'evergreening' and this is now the standard by which all blueberries are grown in low chill climates all over the world. In 1989, the business managed by Shaun Keenan withdrew from soft fruit exports following issues with inconsistent fruit quality and the fluctuation of exchange rates in a market where prices were fixed for the season. Shaun continues to export Australian native flowers to this day through his business Floratrade.



4. AND 5. FIELD DAY IN THE UPPER MURRAY  
6. EXCERPTS FROM EARLY NEWSLETTERS  
7. PAUL CASEY



# 1990 — 2000

The nineties were a decade of tumultuous economic fortunes, starting with the recession that Australia 'had to have' from 1990 to 1991. Really the industry needed a levy to be put in place to fund investment in R&D and to support the further growth of the industry. As with all changes of this nature, there were those who strongly backed the idea and those who just as vehemently opposed it. This division nearly folded the organisation and without the perseverance of people like Kevin Collins and Margaret Tucker, it may well have collapsed altogether. To succeed, the association needed to represent everyone in the industry and that had to include the rapidly rising base of growers in the northern areas in NSW. Pam Vroland put in a lot of effort to try to broaden the perspective of the ABGA and bring the Woolgoolga area growers into the fold – particularly those from the OzGroup cooperative.

The International Society for Horticultural Science (ISHS) International Symposium on Vaccinium Culture was convened by Dr Kevin Clayton-Greene at Melbourne University in January 1993 and Narandra Patel presented a paper on the breeding program taking place in New Zealand. Mal Deveson managed to negotiate access to these varieties for the Australian market and started a propagation program supplying plants to interested growers.

In July 1994, Margaret wrote to Greg Luke, a blueberry grower at the time in Western Australia, to encourage him to join the ABGA. At this point, Margaret lists the membership as 10 from NSW, 1 Qld, 1 SA (Grant Gartrell), 10 Tasmanian, 2 WA & 29 Victorians. She continues by saying that they 'are working closely with the Australian Rubus Growers Assn., (ARGA)'. In 1994, annual membership was \$40 and the committee consisted of six individuals, including Margaret back in the President's chair, Mal Deveson as the ABGF Delegate and Evert Driessen as Treasurer.

## THE AIMS BACK THEN ARE NOT SO DIFFERENT FROM THE AIMS OF THE ASSOCIATION TODAY:

1. To bring together for their mutual benefit all persons involved with the growing and propagation of blueberries.
2. To establish blueberries as a viable industry by the promotion and encouragement of the consumption of blueberries in Australia and overseas.
3. To develop local and export markets for both dessert quality and processing fruit. The Association will develop strategies for promotion of blueberries.
4. To pursue improved productivity within the industry, the Association will:
  - a. Promote information exchange by the publishing of a newsletter and the holding of seminars, field days, etc.
  - b. Encourage the establishment of formal education facilities for the industry
  - c. Develop group buying procedures
  - d. Identify research and extension needs
5. To develop effective Government and community support for the industry. The Association will develop a register of blueberry growers and will cooperate with other horticulture groups and affiliate with appropriate industry associations.

It was this committee and a group of growers and propagators within the industry that really got the organisation back up and running again. Kevin Collins started to put out a regular newsletter from his base at Yellingbo Berries in Wandin, Victoria and there were a series of field days, berry expos and even trips to see the industry in New Zealand.

In the later nineties, Kevin Collins, in the October 1998 edition of the newsletter, thanks the committee for deciding 'to have the Newsletter printed more professionally than my previous endeavour', signalling another step forward in the development of the industry communications. Well ahead of its time, the communique also refers to the 'possible provision of a Web page on the Internet' and bear in mind, this is the pre-Google era as that business had only started in September of 1998. Margaret's reputation in the blueberry industry attracted many of the growers who are still a part of the industry today. You may recall the story of Rod & Jill Sanders from Drum Drum Farm down on the Mornington Peninsula and how they came into blueberries after having heard about 'this fancy new crop called Blueberries' and visiting the orchard at the Joy's farm near Pearcedale. And I am sure there are many more out there that owe their blueberry careers to the enthusiasm of Margaret Tucker. And fittingly, this contribution was honoured in the Australia Day Awards list in 2000, when Margaret was awarded an Order of Australia for her services to the blueberry industry.

In 1998, something else happened on the other side of the world that propelled the global blueberry industry forward and continues to be a major driver for consumer purchase today. Dr Jim Joseph and Dr Ronald Pryor from Tufts University in the United States published the findings of their research into the nutritional profile of blueberries amongst a reference group of around fifty other fruits and vegetables. The cataclysmic findings showed blueberries contained the highest concentration of antioxidant compounds of any known fruit or vegetable at the time. This one fact alone has transformed this humble berry into a super star and earnt it the well-deserved title of a 'super food'.

In 1999, the 10th National Berryfruit Conference was held from 24th to 28th May at Twin Waters Resort on the Sunshine Coast. It was reported that the 'content of presentations and discussions, the opportunity to meet other growers, and the outstanding speakers such as Mike Mainland, made the Conference an enjoyable and worthwhile event.'

An interesting excerpt from the May 1999 journal discusses the export market for the season just finished; 'Export of Australian blueberries requires a concerted effort by all parties concerned. Growers must be dedicated and focused on the job at hand. Exporters must understand the clients' requirements exactly and have an intimate knowledge of the competition from within Australia and from USA, South America etc. Consistent quality, quantity and continuity of the markets in Europe and emerging markets of Japan and South East Asia

is 100's of times larger than Australia's demand. Japan alone is seeking in excess of 500,000 trays of fruit for the 1999-2000 season from all countries. However, the fruit needs to be hand-picked, specially prepared product, but they are willing to pay the money. The majority of exports are done by three North Australian companies who are growing for the express purpose of servicing the demand from overseas. Quality of fruit has been good and well received internationally. Prices have ranged this season from \$24 to \$36 per tray (12 by 150gm) for export, and approximately \$12 to \$25 per tray on the local market'. How times have changed.

Another concern for growers at this time was 'the impending SQF 2000 / HACCP introduction'. Fast-forward almost twenty years and now it is the advent of HARPS with all the additional burdens that places on growers which is providing new headaches. At that point, the newsletter laid out the options for growers many of which are as relevant today as twenty years ago;

- comply with all the new requirements and absorb the cost,
- becoming a solely Pick-Your-Own operation,
- convert the blueberries into various value-added products,
- a combination of each of the above,
- and finally, consider retirement.

Kevin signed off this edition of the newsletter with the perennial hopeful wish for the upcoming season being 'a great season, enough water, no hail, frantic customers and good returns'.

The year 2000, of course, also saw the introduction of the GST from 1st July. With any change of this nature comes confusion. Why would jams not attract GST but juices would? For most growers, simply applying for and using their ABN would deal with that issue, but extra bureaucracy required nonetheless. The joy of the first Business Advisory Statement under the GST regime is described with mirthful sarcasm; I guess there must be a new definition for the word "progress"! Again, Kevin's clarity of thought and optimism shines through in his editorial when he highlights 'all things considered, while decisions concerning future directions growers will follow may be difficult for some, the industry is growing steadily (as is our membership), and survival and prosperity will still depend on good weather, good practices and high standard of product for sale'.

Tragically in mid July 2000, Margaret Tucker passed away suddenly from an aggressive form of leukaemia and the loss of one of the key industry pioneers was felt across the country. As Christine Lean, Margaret's daughter laments, she didn't live to see the industry she loved really blossom or the iconic Time magazine cover, a copy of which I have been unable to track down sadly.

I am strongly recommending that all Blueberry growers join the A.B.G.A. - the national body - to enable us to achieve our aims. State groups can then be formed to deal with local matters. So far there are 10 NSW members, 1 Qld, 1 SA, 10 Tasmanian, 2 WA & 29 Victorians.



8. KEVIN & ANN COLLINS

9. GRANT GARTRELL - THE LONE SA MEMBER



9.

## Who remembers the wonderful Blueberry Recipe Book produced and sold in the 80's and 90's?



10.

10. SEPTEMBER 22nd 1999, KEVIN COLLINS AND SOME LOCAL GROWERS MEET WITH WOOLWORTHS

11. L-R: GRAEME HARVEY, MAL DEVESON, MARGARET TUCKER, ELIZABETH HARVEY ATTENDING A BERRY EXPO



11.



## VALE MARGARET TUCKER

EXTRACTED FROM SPRING 2000 JOURNAL EDITORIAL BY KEVIN COLLINS

Margaret has selflessly been very active in organising conferences, been President and Secretary of the Association over various periods, and always been very generous in terms of time and willingness to contribute to individual growers and the industry as a whole and was eventually officially recognised by the award of the Australian Order of Merit. While this both surprised and pleased her, it did not lessen her practical battles with starlings and drought which were affecting their bushes until her sudden and untimely death. Margaret's enthusiasm, drive, vital personality and contributions to the blueberry industry will not be forgotten.

# THE OZ GROUP

## — *A Brief History*

**Jaspal Singh Lehl came to Australia with his wife and two young children in 1985 from the Indian state of Punjab. Deep family ties and trans-generational support run strongly through the entire story of the OzGroup right from the very first blueberry farm planted by Jaspal and his family in 1996 at Corindi Beach.**

When Jaspal arrived from India, he and his family came to the Woolgoolga area and worked in Johnson's blueberry operation (now Costa's) during the season. In the off-season for blueberries he journeyed out to Griffith and worked the grape-picking season. It is clear from the outset that this is a family that understands hard work and is not afraid to tackle a challenge. In 1988, Jaspal's parents Joginder Singh Lehl & Beant Kaur Lehl travelled to Australia to visit, and with support from within the wider family, were able to move permanently to Woolgoolga in 1989.

With extremely generous assistance and support from other family members, 118 acres of bush were purchased in 1989 for the princely sum of \$125,000. This is a small sum in today's terms but 30 years ago was a fortune. A banana farm was started literally from scratch, hewn from the ground by dedication and good old-fashioned hard graft. Peach trees were added and the farm provided a relatively stable existence for the family, which by now had grown to three children with Herjot born in Australia in 1994.

Watching the blossoming blueberry industry and having spent time getting to know blueberries whilst working for the Johnson's farm in his first few years in Australia, Jaspal wanted to add blueberries to the home farm's stable of crops. Initially Jaspal worked to try to propagate up his own plants as getting hold of nursery stock was slightly challenging in the early 1990's for many reasons. Eventually he was able to source plant stocks from Ridley Bell and started with two hectares of blueberries – mainly Misty and Sharp Blue varieties.

Those early years were tough with such a labour-intensive crop and what was a relatively small farming operation.

In the late 1999 a group of four Woolgoolga blueberry growers including Jaspal came together in a partnership to work jointly for mutual benefit. Those founding partners were Jaspal; Gary, Harvinder and George Atwal; Satpal and Harjinder Gill; and Gurmukh and Kulbir Sidhu. Word spread, and the group quickly grew, adding more and more partners until in 2006 the twenty-six partners of Oz Berries purchased a block of land and built their own pack house facility with the help of a Federal Government grant.

By 2013, the company partnership arrangement had simply become too unwieldy to manage efficiently as a corporate structure and the organisation made the bold step to close out the existing business arrangements and establish a brand-new full cooperative. OzGroup Co-op Limited was born.

The organisation operates under the true cooperative spirit; mutual benefit with mutually observed rules. All members must market all of their fruit through the cooperative. The business is managed by a board and there are full-time staff in all of the operational positions that you would expect to see in a sophisticated multi-million-dollar business. The co-op has evolved on to meet the needs of its' members; agronomists are now part of the package and the business even operates its own produce store in town to provide ag supplies after a business closure left the area with a single supplier holding an undesirable monopoly position.

The Lehl home farm is now covered in 14,000 blueberry bushes and the family has bought a second property with macadamias already in situ. The farm enterprises now include 35,000 bushes with 2.5 hectares of hydroponic raspberries in tunnels plus a further 2 hectares under way. Remarkably, three generations of the family are still involved in the farms on a daily basis, testament to an incredible work ethic and the amazing support that Jaspal's family continue to provide.

The middle child, Aman, was just five months old when he came to Australia and is now not only fully involved in the running of the family operations, but he also gives his time back to the industry as a member of the ABGA Committee. His cousin, Gurmesh, is the current Vice President of the association whose family runs a property in Corindi where he grows 12 hectares of blueberries as well as a significant macadamia nut operation.

Today, the OzGroup has over 150 members and is an outstanding example of how an effectively structured and forward-thinking cooperative model can deliver real benefits for growers.