



PART TWO

1978-2000.

CELEBRATING

40

YEARS

OF THE
AUSTRALIAN BLUEBERRY
GROWERS ASSOCIATION



BY JANE RICHTER

2000 — the present day

CELEBRATING 40 YEARS

Through the decades, field days and farm tours have been a key component of effective communication and the sharing of new ideas and growing practices in the blueberry industry. The AGM and field day at the Driessen's farm at Narbethong on 28th of October 2000 brought presentations from David Williams from Knoxfield on Pest Management and Gwyn Jones on Soil Care and Fertility. The August 2001 ABGA AGM was held at Paul & Nicky Casey's farm 'The Big Berry' in Hoddles Creek in Victoria, providing members the chance to take a close look at the very efficient and effective operation at Victoria's biggest berry farm.

2001 also saw ABGA become a member of Deciduous Fruit Australia Inc., (together with the Australian Apple & Pear Growers, Stone Fruit Growers, Cherry Growers, Canning Fruit Growers, Nashi Growers and Rubus Growers Associations). This meant that all blueberry growers got to have their views represented at the meetings of the new overarching body Horticulture Australia Ltd (HAL).

2002 brought with it the first outbreak of the fungal disease Blueberry Rust in Australia in NSW. This thrust the issue of biosecurity to the top of the Associations' agenda, a spot where it remains today. It was also a year where the volume of supply markedly increased prompting agents to start advising their growers to seek out a broader range of sales avenues for their fruit than just the central market system. Kevin Collins' editorial comments that year resonate strongly with where the industry lies today, and his recommendations are absolutely just as relevant to today's growers.

'Agents are also starting to warn their growers that they are aware that the supply of berries is starting to increase and could result in decreased prices unless growers start looking to diversify their markets. Those who supply their local markets and U-Pick customers may not have the same problems to face in the near future, but where a grower has a reasonable tonnage of blueberries to market the situation may become more difficult.'

'Whatever the situation each individual grower may face, it would be foolish to just sit and wait for it to happen. It might be worthwhile to start talking to other growers in your area regarding the possibility of forming a co-operative to enable you to access new markets requiring more volume than you individually can meet, possibly looking to produce value added products like blueberry wines, jams, etc. Good, solid, consistent financial returns could quite easily be the result of being proactive rather than reactive.'

Pam Vroland successfully applied for and won funding from the newly formed Horticulture Australia Limited (HAL) body to assist with the production of the journal. Discussions were also held about the possibility of having a funded secretariat and an Industry Development Officer (IDO) which were really needed to drive the industry forward at a speed that volunteers could rarely muster.

The **2002-03** season was described as an 'interesting season' with many growers 'having to battle a drastic lack of rain, threat of bushfires, Grant Gartrell was entertained by hail and galeforce winds, and the icing on the cake was the chemical residue debacle.'

Paul Casey took on the President role this year and in his first address in the Spring 2003 Journal, he put forward a very prosaic focus on the 'important aspect that must concern all growers - consistent quality product.

'Each of us must be committed to this objective, otherwise, we will let our industry down. All the resolve we, as an association, make to the promotion of our product, will only produce dividends if customers return to buy blueberries because of an enjoyable taste experience.'

Paul's wise words stand as true today as they did fifteen years ago, particularly when combined with recent research insights that tell us a consumer can stay away from a fresh produce product for up to six weeks after having a bad taste experience.

The mid-2000's saw most of Australia in the grips of a chronic shortage of water. The restriction of access to river water, drying bores, a lack of rain and shrinking dams all contributed to difficult growing conditions, but conversely lead to the development of better mulching techniques and improvements in irrigation technology.

Mal Deveson had always kept close ties with Ridley and in the mid 2000's approached him to see if he would like to set up a joint breeding program. Ridley had his own breeding program concentrating on low chill blueberries which also included some collaboration with the University of Florida. The New Zealand varieties hadn't worked as well as had been hoped, and a new approach was needed. Mal and Ridley have now worked together on breeding through a joint venture set up at Moondarra – mixing Ridley's low chill pollen with Mal's highbush – for the last 12 years.

The concept of an industry wide levy to help fund both research and promotional activities was not a new one but was high on the list of industry priorities in 2004 for President Paul Casey. Research from 2001 highlighted the fact that only ¼ of Australian adults had ever tried blueberries and the only way to shift this significantly was a large and consistent investment in promotional activity. Paul remained in the President role and continued to provide excellent leadership.

His Spring 2005 address reminded all members *'the present committee has worked very hard to bring together the divisions that have handicapped the ABGA in the past. We are all Australians and to make our industry one of which we can be proud, we must work more closely and productively together. As specialist growers, we need to drive the industry towards coordinated marketing programs and at the same time, we need to invest in R & D work that will lead to better varieties and growing systems.'*

The Australian blueberry industry is at a challenging point in its development. Increasingly, we have become aware of overseas competition. New Zealand blueberries are already a part of our domestic scene. South American blueberry growers (with labour cost advantage) will look to capture the Northern Hemisphere markets currently being supplied by Australian growers.'

It is the domestic market on which the ABGA needs to focus. We need more Australians to eat blueberries, not only because it is good for them, but to take up the increased production coming on line over the next 5 years. Part of 'growing the market' is generic promotion, but it also encompasses uniformity and consistency in quality, packaging and pest and disease control.

2005 saw the majority of growers vote in favour of a compulsory levy, collected at the point of sale and administered by HAL. The sense of excitement expressed in the editorial excerpts was palpable. Finally, a funding breakthrough that could transform the future of the industry and put paid to the uncertainty dogging longer term investment in valuable developmental projects.

Field days continued to be a valuable aspect of the industry's development, with hands-on demonstrations a popular part of any day.

It was in **2006** that Kevin Collins finally handed on the editorial baton of the bi-annual journal to Sophie O'Neill. At this point, Kate Deveson had been the creative force behind the graphic design and presentation of the journal in its highly professional format since leaving University and coming on board in 1998. Kate and Sophie worked tirelessly for each and every edition to take the journal to new heights, teasing out contributions from reluctant writers and chasing down every opportunity to bring value back to every member of ABGA in their coverage of key industry activities.

In early 2006, Paul Casey highlights in his President's report: *'At the time of writing this report, the outcome of submission to DAFF (Dept. of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry) for the introduction of compulsory levy is unknown. It was never going to be easy with one grower (Chiquita / Blueberry Farms of Australia) expected to pay more than 50 percent of the levied amount.'*

Suffice to comment, that all parties want the levy to be introduced. DAFF required a letter of support from the Chiquita Board. In such letter, the Chiquita Board have requested certain conditions, agreed to by ABGA executive, which DAFF are having difficulty fitting into their policy manual.'

The negotiations between the three parties unfortunately broke down in mid-2006 and it was reported that *'at the AGM on 1st September 2006, the introduction of a voluntary levy, based on the same elements as proposed in the compulsory levy, was put to all members present and received unanimous endorsement.'*

And so, the voluntary levy was born. And with it, the ability to make secure investments into activities that would seek to grow the industry. A marketing committee was formed with Greg McCulloch, Wayne Knight, Peter McPherson and Natalie Bell to oversee the newly commissioned industry promotional programme.

Other income from the levy gave surety to the IDO position and provided funds for investment into R&D, the first of which was a study by Dr. Rod Jones of DPI at Knoxfield, reviewing all of the current work published on human nutrition and blueberries. The purpose of the project being to provide substantive evidence to reinforce the health credentials of fresh blueberries, preparing the ground for the berry's 'superfood' status, which although largely a marketing term rather than a scientific nomenclature, is nonetheless an exceptionally powerful label to be able to tout.

In **2007**, Paul Casey handed on the Presidential role to Greg McCulloch, who had started his blueberry farm in Tasmania in 2006 with his wife. In Paul's parting address, and with his sound judgement, he comments on the need to not *'throw our hands up in despair and talk about the government's stupidity in entering into a FTA with countries like Chile' but rather to 'resolve to work more closely together to build on what we have got and enhance the public's perception on why it is important to have a blueberry industry in Australia.'*

Then as now, Australia cannot compete on the cost of production, neither should we attempt to do so in most of horticulture. The role for Australia is to produce consistently high-quality fruit, with superior food safety credentials and exemplary provenance.

The expansion of blueberry orchards on the NSW north coast continued through the noughties with many banana plantations being re-invented as blueberry farms.

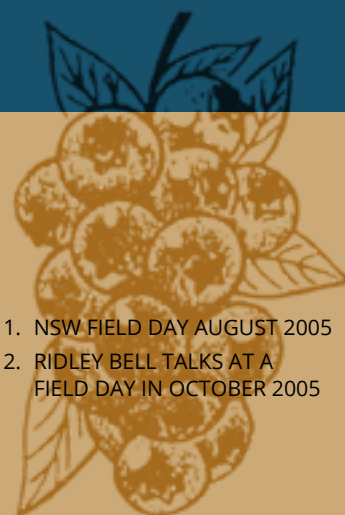
In **2006**, the twenty-six partners of Oz Berries purchased a block of land and built their own pack house facility with the help of a Federal Government grant and this facility operates for the benefit of all 153 current members of the Oz Group Cooperative thirteen years later.



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1. NSW FIELD DAY AUGUST 2005
2. RIDLEY BELL TALKS AT A FIELD DAY IN OCTOBER 2005

The **2007-08** season will be remembered by many as the year of chronic crop losses in NSW with a freak hailstorm causing massive damage to parts of the Lismore area on October 9, 2007. Conversely, drought still plagued large parts of the country with, in Greg's words, *'governments doing too little, too late to establish infrastructure to sustainably manage our water resources'*.

Learning from our north American fellow growers has been a feature in the development of the Australian Blueberry industry right from the beginning. In 2008, Sue and Chester Keon-Cohen attended the International Society for Horticultural Science (ISHS) 9th International Vaccinium Symposium at Corvallis in Oregon in July and Chester shared his fascinating observations from the pre-Symposium tour of lingonberry, cranberry and blueberry farms in the journal published shortly after. Philip Wilk delivered huge amounts of value back to the industry by coordinating a series of articles for the journal from other ABGA attendees as well as sharing his own experiences.

2009 brought horror to many, with the devastating losses of life and livelihoods dealt by the bushfires in Victoria. On Saturday, 7 February 2009, 173 people tragically lost their lives, 414 were injured, more than a million wild and domesticated animals were lost, and 450,000 hectares of land were burned.

In the Autumn 2009 Journal, Nina Lunde from Blueberry Hill in Kinglake bravely shared her horrific bushfire experience. Nina told of the community spirit and support she and her family received and her great sense of optimism for the future, an incredible outlook to have taking into account the traumatic experiences Nina and her family and friends endured.

By the end of the decade, the area under cultivation across the country was estimated at 625 hectares split 70% : 30% low chill to high chill varieties. Total production volume sat at 2775 tonnes with nearly 60% sold into the fresh domestic market. The total market value was approximately \$41m. Fresh exports were 270 tonnes with fresh Australian blueberries selling in Japan as well as other premium markets.

The changes that the industry has witnessed in the last decade have been every bit as striking as the previous thirty years. The Driscoll's name was brought to Australia in 2010 when a partnership was formed between Costa and Driscoll's Strawberry Associates, Inc (US). Costa is now Australia's largest grower, packer and marketer of fresh Australian blueberries, and grows berries in Queensland, New South Wales, Western Australian and Tasmania through a mix of owned and contract farms.

The summer season of **2009-10** was marked by a dramatic increase in imports of fresh blueberries from New Zealand, causing Greg McCulloch to remark in his President's report that *'there has been more New Zealand fruit here, and over a longer period, no doubt wanting to take advantage of the continuing growth in the market, driven by our promotions program, which is funded by some of our members, but not at all by our New Zealand neighbours.'*

Well-deserved recognition was awarded to Ridley Bell and Mal Deveson in **2010**. Ridley won the coveted NSW Farmer of the Year and Mal Deveson walked away with the 'delicious' Magazine Produce Award's Gold Medal, both a celebration of their achievement in fresh blueberry production.



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3. OZ BERRIES PACKHOUSE

4. L-R: LIZ BURNS, RONICE & WAYNE KNIGHT, PHILLIP WILK, JUSTINE COX & PENNY TIDEMAN AT THE ISHS 13TH ANNUAL VACCINIUM SYMPOSIUM IN AT CORVALLIS, OREGON

5. NSW FIELD DAY AUGUST 2005

The latest decade has really seen the industry transformed by the growth in mega-plantings, many of which are located in areas of Australia not renowned for fresh berry production. A small number of very large businesses have dramatically increased the production capability and the real harvest scale from these new orchards is yet to be fully realised.

In **2011**, the ABGA was invited to the inaugural meeting of the International Blueberry Organisation (IBO) with ABGA Treasurer, Peter McPherson the nominated representative, also being elected Treasurer of the IBO and Andres Armstrong (Chile representative), the President. The IBO is a global organisation bringing together leaders from around the blueberry world in all segments of the industry, including blueberry producers and marketers, affiliated businesses, social groups, and governmental organisations worldwide. All come together to learn, share, increase understanding, distribute information, address mutual challenges, coordinate potential solutions and explore opportunities. Ultimately, the organisation exists to advance the health and sustainability of the blueberry industry.

Perfection Fresh invested in a 20,000-plant farm in Bundaberg that had its first harvest in **2012**. Bundaberg offers less rainfall, earlier chill and warmer winter nights meaning the harvest from that area has almost finished by the time the northern NSW season starts. The Perfection Fresh farm featured an intensive farming system that involves covering all of the crop, making it a lot more capital intensive than just outdoor production.

In **2013**, the Fresh Produce Group/Pascoe's joint venture - Smart Berries – established a 100-hectare blueberry farm at Mundubbera three hours inland from Hervey Bay, which now has over 500,000 bushes with up to 14 varieties growing to produce fruit at different times of the season.

As part of its joint venture with giant US firm Driscolls, Costa has growers and alliances in five states, and its principal farm at Corindi, north of Coffs Harbour, is the largest single blueberry planting in Australia, covering 300 hectares. And an insatiable appetite by consumers for Australian blueberries is driving winter production as far north as tropical north Queensland. Tropical blueberry production has quickly become visible on the Atherton Tablelands, about 80 kilometres inland from Cairns, with endless rows of white, igloo-shaped tunnels standing in stark contrast to the more usual crops of potatoes and sugar cane.

By **2014** local production of blueberries had quadrupled since 2007, while global volumes had trebled over 10 years, making blueberries the fastest growing fresh produce product globally, thanks in part to new varieties developed right here in Australia. Industry development officer Phillip Wilk estimated the total area under production approached 1000ha, producing 5000 tonnes of blueberries in 2014.

Traditionally, blueberries were grown in the summer season from December until April. However, the industry's heartland of northern NSW and southern Queensland produce the fruit as early as June, accounting for more than 80 per cent of total Australian output. The quest to grow the fruit in decent volumes from April to June, creating a true year-round season, is well under way, thanks to the breeding of warm-tolerant varieties and growing in climates that ripen the berries earlier, such as the Bundaberg area and the Atherton Tablelands.

General manager of the berry category for the Costa Group, Peter McPherson, said that overcoming the challenges of growing blueberries in far north Queensland required a multi-million-dollar investment in genetic development and infrastructure, and it has clearly paid off.

In **2016**, the Costa Group expected to pick about 600 tonnes of blueberries in its far north Queensland orchards between May and November and announced plans to expand its tropical berry footprint from 42 to 75 hectares across 2017-18.

"Normally you talk about blueberries being high chill, so grown in the colder climates like Tasmania, or low to medium chill, which we normally grow around Coffs Harbour (in New South Wales), but this is virtually no chill."

Mr McPherson said securing a supply of fresh blueberries 52-weeks-of-the-year had made it worthwhile. *"Winter production of blueberries was virtually non-existent. The winter season has always been very high-priced and kept a lot of consumers from being able to put their hands in their pocket,"* he said.

In **2015-16**, blueberry production was valued at \$146 million (LVP). The industry was rapidly expanding with farmers on average producing 11,500 tonnes of blueberries per annum.

Another key feature of the expansion in the industry has been the investment in new growing systems. Nicola-Anne Mann, a 2014 Nuffield Scholar, produced an excellent analysis of protected cropping systems for berries in Australia, and in her report, she highlights *"the focus is shifting to production efficiency by looking at the best ways to optimise labour, water, nutrients, energy, pollination, improved genetics and timing. The pros of adopting protected cropping, substrates and hydroponics in the fresh berry industry outweigh the cons despite higher capital investment and the current limitations for mechanically harvested crops within protected cropping structures."*

The IBO holds annual Blueberry summits in various blueberry producing countries. In 2015 this was successfully held in Coffs Harbour, Australia. In **2016** the summit was held in Argentina and ABGA representative Peter McPherson had the privilege of being elected President, an office he still holds today.

By **2018**, the Oz Group became the biggest blueberry supplier in Australia, producing 37 million punnets of blueberries, 1.1 million punnets of raspberries and 202,000 punnets of blackberries.

The **future** is incredibly bright for the Australian blueberry industry. Year-round consistent availability of high quality, fresh blueberries is the key to continuing to grow demand as consumers want to have access to fruit staples all year round, like apples and bananas. The focus that the industry will now receive as part of Berries Australia will ensure that access to critical inputs like labour is prioritised and access to key export markets is realised. What all growers in the industry need to do is focus on continuous improvement in eating quality and ensure strict adherence to all four of the major focus areas contained within the Code of Conduct.