

# Growing young horticulturalists at Costa Berries in Western Australia

Helen Newman, Berry Industry Development Officer, Agricultural Produce Commission (WA)

Costa Berries in Western Australia is located just over 80 km north of Perth in the locality of Neergabby (West Gingin), 12 km inland from the Indian Ocean. The 40-hectare property has almost 180,000 blueberry plants, with two main varieties that crop from June/July through to November/December. The farm employs 150 people during peak harvest, with a mix of local employees, seasonal workers, and people on working holiday visas. There is a permanent workforce of 25 people in positions including agronomists, operations, logistics, safety and quality. With popular tourist towns within 20 to 30 minutes' drive and a scenic coastal location, it's a nice region to call home.

Costa has a strong focus on supporting and developing staff and providing long-term career opportunities. They offer on-the-job experience, including an 18-month graduate program, mentoring, and internal and external training opportunities, apprenticeships and traineeships, as well as university scholarships.

To get the inside perspective, I spoke to two of Costa Berries' up-and-coming horticulture professionals. I was keen to understand what attracted them to the horticulture industry, what they like about working at Costa Berries, what they are looking forward to and what the challenges are.



**Anurdha Karavita Arachchi (L) and Olivia Bell (R) at Costa Berries, West Gingin, WA.**

Photo credit: Helen Newman

## **Anurdha Karavita Arachchi, Irrigation and Nutrition Manager**

Anu completed a Bachelor of Agricultural Science Degree in Sri Lanka with a major in Agricultural Engineering in 2013. With a passion for groundwater, hydrology and modelling, she completed a Masters in Hydrogeology at the University of Western Australia in 2016.

Anu was originally hoping to work as a Hydrogeologist in the mining industry, but was unable to break into that job market. She instead directed her efforts towards horticulture where she could pursue jobs that satisfied her keen interest for engineering and hydrology.

Anu started with Costa Berries in December 2017, managing the berry irrigation and nutrition program, analysing climate data and assisting with other on-farm agronomics.

## What's the best thing about working at Costa Berries?

Working outdoors and working with plants and water (Anu loves all things irrigation!). Having access to a national team of experts with plenty of technical resources is also excellent. The local team here is good too and Costa is a good employer; they provide a lot of learning and development opportunities and I admire Costa's approach to sustainable commercial farming.

## What are you looking forward to in the future?

Improving my skills around nutrition management and working with our National Operations Resource Manager (based in Coffs Harbour NSW) to overcome the groundwater quality issues at this site.

## What challenges and R&D opportunities do you see?

Water quality and the impact of climate change, particularly extreme heat events and frosts, are the biggest challenges here at the moment. Breeding\* to produce hardier plants or research into strategies that could be used to create better growing conditions would be beneficial.

\*Costa has their own in-house variety improvement program that utilises their extensive network of farms to select, evaluate and develop new varieties suitable for a range of growing conditions. The team uses traditional plant breeding techniques to identify and develop selections chosen for their performance across key areas of fruit quality, productivity, and agronomic

## Are there any barriers for young people entering this industry?

Yes, there is often a requirement for experience before you start a job and not many people out of university have on-the-job experience. Other industries such as IT, engineering and accounting offer internships or work placements to students and graduates. This doesn't appear to be commonplace in the horticultural industry but would certainly be very helpful to encourage more people into horticulture as a career choice.

## Olivia Bell, Horticultural Lead

Olivia went to an agricultural high school in Adelaide, South Australia. She left a little uninspired by agriculture (broadacre agriculture really), and so she enrolled in a Marine Biology Degree at Adelaide University before switching back to agriculture in her third year of study. Olivia completed her Agricultural Science Degree in 2016 and took a gap-year working for a consultancy research firm conducting broadacre chemical trials.

Still unenthused by broadacre agriculture, Olivia jumped at an opportunity she found on the recruitment platform SEEK, to move to WA and join the Costa Berries team. Olivia started with Costa Berries in January 2018 as a junior horticulturalist and is now the Horticulture Lead, overseeing crop agronomics (particularly pest and disease management and spray programs) and management of various on-farm trials.

## What attracted you to horticulture?

I wasn't interested in broadacre agriculture, but horticulture seemed more interesting and technical. There is more opportunity to work with challenging areas like nutrition, irrigation and pest management. I also like fruit, so it's nice to be able to see and taste the final product. Wheat and barley need to be processed so you don't have a real connection to the final product.

## What's the best thing about working at Costa Berries?

There are lots of good things. You are outdoors and the job is hands-on. You are watching plants develop and get yield, and you are seeing the results of what you have done to improve things year-on-year (except when the heat gets in the way).

It's great working in the small farm team we have here, we have a nice crew and it's a good atmosphere. We are small enough to have good communication channels between all the different parts of the farm (growing, harvest, quality, packing) so you can see the direct impact of your work on other parts of the business.

## What are you looking forward to in the future?

I'm always learning. Each day and each season I learn something new. I love learning and putting things into practice to improve yields and fruit quality. I would love to get into the breeding side of things, particularly to improve the timing of the crop and the size of the fruit.

## What challenges and R&D opportunities do you see?

I have concerns about Varroa mite and what that might mean for industry as we are so reliant on bees for pollination. Blueberry rust is also a concern, but we are lucky to not have seen it here on this farm. Chemical options to treat occasional pests like thrip are also an issue, as these pests can be bad one year and nowhere to be seen the next.

## Are there any barriers for young people entering this industry?

I didn't notice any barriers to employment when I was looking for a job. There were six jobs for every university graduate at the time. I was part of some networking groups at university that linked students to potential employers so that did help. Also, LinkedIn makes it easier to connect with others in the industry.

It's clear that there is more work to be done in promoting the breadth and depth of interesting and rewarding jobs available in the horticulture sector, particularly when it comes to attracting the next generation of professionals.

Social media platforms like LinkedIn also serve as an additional channel to share more information about what your business has to offer. Even a very basic business profile can deliver benefits to potential employees, especially if you do not have your own website.

For more ideas about attracting and retaining staff SEE PAGE 14



**QFF**  
QUEENSLAND  
FARMERS'  
FEDERATION

**AG JOBS  
QUEENSLAND**

**FIND YOUR NEXT OPPORTUNITY  
IN QUEENSLAND AGRICULTURE**

Queensland Farmers' Federation (QFF) have developed Ag Jobs Queensland responding to feedback from its peak body members who are hearing from farmers all over the state that attracting a skilled workforce remains one of the critical challenges facing their enterprises.

The Queensland agricultural sector will now have the support of a sophisticated job matching tool to attract valuable skilled labour along with the opportunity to showcase the incredible career opportunities the sector has to offer.

OFFICIALLY LAUNCHED ON 23 FEBRUARY

[www.agjobsqueensland.com.au](http://www.agjobsqueensland.com.au) is a dedicated industry jobs platform connecting employers from the agricultural sector across the state with prospective employees.

Through the platform, businesses are able to advertise their available positions, promote their jobs through social media and create an Employer Profile to showcase their business as an employer of choice.

Job seekers looking to work in what is arguably the most exciting industry in Queensland can similarly use the platform to upload their CV and connect with interested employers across the agricultural supply chain.

**Find out more at [www.agjobsqueensland.com.au](http://www.agjobsqueensland.com.au)**