

Profile: Jamie Pollen, Queensland Berries, Qld

Jen Rowling, Project Manager, Berries Australia

Queensland Berries was established in 2003 by Richard and Melissa McGruddy. Starting out as a small family-owned strawberry farm, the business has rapidly expanded to become one of Australia's largest berry producers.

Strawberry production has continually increased since the early days and in 2008 they introduced raspberries, becoming the first commercial producers of Rubus varieties in Queensland. Blackberries followed and the small family-owned business is now a vast enterprise operating across five sites in both the Moreton Bay and Granite Belt regions in South East Queensland.

With the significant labour required to not just maintain but continue to grow production for a business of this size and scope, Richard and Melissa have invested heavily in access to a consistent and reliable workforce. In 2020, they become Approved Employers for the Pacific Labour Scheme (PLS) and then in 2021, they were approved for the Seasonal Worker Program (SWP).



Part of the team at Queensland Berries. Photo credit: Queensland Berries

They currently bring in workers from the Solomon Islands, Tonga and Timor-Leste and are exceptionally proud of their multicultural team.

Queensland Berries has also built a strong team of young and dynamic agronomists and production managers to work on the expansion of their extensive protected cropping systems, with responsibility for the management of plant health, fruit quality and all aspects of production across their strawberry and Rubus crops. These bright young people are the future of the Australian berry industry and to support their continued development, Berries Australia introduced the Emerging Leaders program at last year's BerryQuest International 2022.

One such future leader is 25-year-old agronomist Jamie Pollen who joined Queensland Berries in January 2022 with a Bachelor's degree in Sustainable Agricultural Science, majoring in Agronomy and an enthusiasm for what she does which has seen her progress quickly in her role with the business. Jamie was the recipient of an Emerging Leaders Bursary to attend BerryQuest International 2022 and is a shining example of the passionate and talented young people building their careers in the berry industry.

We caught up with Jamie recently to talk about her role with Queensland Berries and to get her thoughts on the opportunities and challenges for other young people working in the Australian berry industry.



Jamie Pollen. Photo credit: Queensland Country Life

You grew up in North Queensland on a hobby farm so the great outdoors was in your blood, but was there anything in particular that made you follow this career path?

In agronomy there will always be problems that need solving and many exciting possibilities to be uncovered. They say working in agriculture means every day will be a new and exciting adventure and I agree. Rarely are any two days the same.

One of the main reasons I chose this career is that work done in agriculture today passes on something to those who come tomorrow. Whether you are working on the latest technology and research or continuing a long family tradition, agricultural jobs leave a legacy like no other, and I'm passionate about both agronomy and the desire to create change.

What is your current position at Queensland Berries and what crops do you work with?

Since starting at Queensland Berries just over a year ago, my role has expanded considerably. I am now engaged with five of their sites across the Southern Queensland Region growing strawberry, blackberry, and raspberry crops after being promoted to the position of Production Manager.

The skills I developed during my time at the University of Queensland have enabled me to prove my ability to assess and manage complex obstacles. I am a strong trouble-shooter and successful in intense and demanding environments, providing decisive team leadership, and recognised for critical thinking.

I currently manage the growth and profitability of the business through forward planning and liaison with Driscoll's to ensure timely delivery and application of planting and manipulations, alongside forecasting.

I also supervise all agronomy aspects for the improvement of overall crop health and yields, communicating better growing techniques, and adapting new techniques to improve the efficiency of maintenance and harvest tasks.

What have been some of your achievements so far?

I have been able to work with Richard and Melissa to implement systems to ensure Queensland Berries are at the leading-edge of horticultural technology, systems, and processes.

I'm proud to have applied efficient administration and planning practices to execute site-mapping and production planning for the next five years across each site. I have also planned the incorporation of a new irrigation system set-up and a six hectare expansion of one site. I was heavily involved in preparing the farm for the Berry Quest Farm Tour, whilst also providing agronomic support for a new variety of raspberry in addition to the current varieties grown.

One big project I completed was preparing and presenting a yield forecasting document per crop type, variety and site, that enables site managers to see the predicted labour allocation for the coming season. This document enables the in-house registered labour hire team to arrange the workforce in advance, which is a critical part of the business operations.

There are several small trials we have completed to further optimise practices at Queensland Berries. For example, at one site this season a Blackberry crop underwent various pruning trials. This included different cane selections, canopy size and crop structure over six blocks. The results concluded that the correct timing and method of the prune that optimised the plants photosynthetic capabilities not only increased the yield drastically but also gave a more desirable quality and flavour.

What do you love about what you do?

My passion is problem-solving, and I'm not afraid of looking at old methods in a different way and making suggestions to improve and optimise practices. I am very fortunate to be in a position where I can voice my opinion and be heard.

I am a very level-headed and analytical person, and fortunately I have always had strong relationships with my peers, work colleagues and supervisors. Being a young female on a male dominated farm forced me to learn to speak up if I had any new ideas, opinions or problems. I strive to build and maintain good communication skills, be consistent, trustworthy and take ownership for my work.

It has also been helpful to have a good understanding of my strengths and weaknesses, and know when to ask for help myself or to offer assistance to others.

I love that every day is different and creates new challenges and opportunities to work with.

What are the challenges?

I have always had an interest in agricultural science and as the world's population continues to expand, demand is high for agricultural scientists who can find sustainable solutions to the complex challenges of food security and nutritional value under a changing climate. I believe the challenges for the agricultural industry, as a whole, include meeting the consumer demands for food to be produced at higher quality standards. Additionally, it is concerning the lack of young agronomists graduating to keep up with the current developing technology and current national berry footprint.

An enterprise like Queensland Berries requires additional qualified young agronomists to support its expansion. The science behind growing berries in this region is establishing quickly yet there isn't a proportional influx of agronomists graduating to implement these improved growing practices. I hope that articles like this inspire young people to consider this as a career and highlight the fact that we need more agronomists to support the industry.

What do you like most about working for Queensland Berries?

Over the past year I have learnt a multitude of skills from working at Queensland Berries. When I started as an Agronomist I could not have expected to progress into my current position as Production Manager so quickly. In saying this, I believe that I wouldn't have been offered the freedom to grow this quickly in any other private sector.

I am very grateful to be given this opportunity to improve myself and apply skills other than agronomy to this business. In this year alone, I was involved from the very start of tunnel construction to planting to harvesting and on into the future expansion and varietal plans. It's very satisfying seeing this development.

As an Emerging Leaders Bursary recipient, what did you enjoy about the Emerging Leaders program at BerryQuest 2022 and was there anything that you learnt about leadership that you have been able to apply to your work?

I was very grateful to meet other young growers and create networks with like-minded individuals from farms across the region. I loved the workshop run by Cynthia Mahoney that covered topics surrounding leadership, such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator® that helps you to understand your own personality better. It is crucial to firstly understand what personality type you are, so you are aware of your strengths, weaknesses, and possible conflicts with other personality types within your team. This skill is easily applied to the working environment to improve communication between team members and foster success. Using the information learnt from the course it enabled me to understand how I perform as a leader and how to increase productivity within my team.

What would help young emerging leaders like yourself to further develop your career in berries?

The berry industry in Australia has huge potential for growth, although I believe the focus needs to be directed towards optimising practices to create predictable yield and labour figures. Once this is achieved, the focus could shift to consumer demand and ensuring a consistent quality and flavour of the fruit produced.

With the limited number of agronomists graduating, there is even more of a demand for industry support for current graduates. As a young emerging leader that intends to further develop my career in the berry industry, I would suggest continuing in the process of developing a 'Young Berry Farmers' group for the region. It will be built into ongoing learning opportunities for the young agronomists and a chance for us to create networks of like-minded individuals from farms across the region to share best practice and learn from each other.

And finally, what's your favourite berry – to grow and to eat?

My current favourite berry to grow would have to be the *Elvira* blackberry variety. It's an absolute monster of a crop and can be very easily overcropped. I find it particularly interesting the difference in the cropping habit of the floricane crop when compared to the primocane.

I have only experienced one season with *Elvira*, but during the floricane crop, when manipulated correctly, the plant produces aggressive quantities of berries in a very short window. The agronomy driving this yield is canopy management and comes down to the science of maximising the photosynthetic capabilities through increasing sunlight interception through cane selection of the plant.

Although the *Elvira* Blackberry is fascinating to grow, I am very partial to blueberries as my favourite fresh berry to eat! Hopefully, it will be another berry crop I can add to my portfolio very soon!



Richard McGruddy, Queensland Berries.

Photo credit: Queensland Country Life