

Growing strawberries in Scotland

John Gray, Angus Soft Fruits

Recently we had the pleasure of hosting John Gray, Managing Director of Angus Soft Fruits (www.angussoftfruits.co.uk) located in Angus, Scotland, to give him a brief tour of the Australian berry industry. John was visiting berry businesses and other horticultural enterprises in Victoria, Tasmania and New Zealand as part of a Nuffield Farming Scholarship looking at how berry growers can increase their share of the value chain. We asked John if he could give us a snapshot of the Scottish Berry Industry, one that we don't often hear about, and we will be looking forward to hearing the outcomes of his Nuffield research.



In Angus, on the east coast of Scotland we enjoy a mild micro-climate. The influence of the North Sea means that winter temperatures rarely go below freezing and in the summer day-time temperatures average just nineteen degrees Celsius, ideal growing conditions for berries! The introduction of tunnels in the mid-1990s and table tops in the early 2000s were game changers reducing the risk of crop loss from rain which we get all year and improving labour efficiencies.

Over the past twenty years, the Scottish berry industry has seen massive growth and now supplies approximately 20% of UK berries. The UK berry market has a year-round value in excess of £1.6 billion with berries now accounting for close to a quarter of all fruit sales in UK supermarkets. Our industry trade association - British Berry Growers - has been very active in raising consumer awareness for the health benefits of berries.

Angus Soft Fruits, established in 1994, is a family-owned business. We breed, grow, pack and market strawberries, raspberries, blackberries and blueberries to customers in the UK, Europe, the Middle East and Asia.

Strawberries growing on table tops at Angus Soft Fruits.

Photo credit: Angus Soft Fruits



John Gray. Photo credit: Angus Soft Fruits



The East Seaton farm in Scotland – owned by John’s cousin who is also Chairman of Angus Soft Fruits- where strawberries are grown on table tops as part of a 150 hectare tunnel system. This is just one of multiple farms growing berries both in the UK and overseas in collaboration with Angus Soft Fruits enabling the business to offer year-round supply to its customers.

Photo credit: Liam Anderstrem, Airborne Lens Company

All our production is protected with polytunnels, with the majority of crops grown in table-tops and in substrate. Our natural seasonal peaks in late June and early July coincide with the peak of UK demand at the time of the famous Wimbledon tennis tournament.

We grow mainly short day “June bearing” strawberry varieties. We utilise a range of production systems with early, heated tunnels and cooler multispan tunnels allowing us to stretch our season from April through until October. The cooler temperatures allow us to produce among the sweetest and longest shelf-life berries in the UK, many of which we supply into retailers’ premium lines. Fruit is picked directly into punnets in the field before being inspected and check-weighed in our packhouses.

We have a strong focus on sustainability and have made significant progress in reducing our carbon footprint. Through investment in technology and the development of “wonky” ranges we have reduced our levels of wastage. We also recently launched a heat-sealed paper punnet for premium blueberries as part of our journey to reduce plastic usage.

The UK berry industry is facing very challenging times. Over the past two years we have seen inflation in our cost of production of 26%. Whilst retailers have increased the price of berries, very little if any of this increase has made its way to the grower. Given the challenges and the cost of labour, which accounts for over 50% of our production costs, we are likely to see a reduction in production in the coming years.

I recently embarked on a Nuffield Scholarship during which I am studying how we as growers can increase our share of the value chain and therefore improve our net return thus ensuring the future sustainability of the sector.

For more information please contact:

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What is a Nuffield Farming Scholarship?

Nuffield Farming Scholarships are an opportunity that can benefit careers, industry and business, as well as advancing personal development. The Nuffield Farming Scholarships Trust is a registered charity which awards approximately 20 individuals each year with the opportunity to research topics of interest in either farming, food, horticulture, forestry or any other countryside and ancillary industry.

Scholars are able to travel anywhere in the world for a period of no less than 8 weeks to further their knowledge and understanding of their chosen study topic. On return from their travels, they present their findings, the conclusions they have reached and the recommendations to the industry in a variety of formats, including a written report and a presentation at the Annual Nuffield Farming Conference. The Scholars are also expected to use all other means at their disposal to spread the knowledge they have gained within their industry and beyond.

Find out more about the Australian Program at www.nuffield.com.au

