

# Strawberry seasonal plant outlook and propagator summary

Bron Ford, Berry Industry Development Officer

The supply of strawberry plants, both bare root runners and seedling plugs, for winter fruit production was challenging for some commercial propagators during 2019 – particularly those located on the Granite Belt in Queensland.

This report summarises the current status of production at the five accredited strawberry propagators supplying commercial quantities of plants for the 2020 fruit production season. The summary highlights the variety of production systems being used and the lengths some

of the companies have gone to in order to spread the risk associated with climate impacts, and the various strategies being implemented to ensure priority plant orders for commercial fruit growers have the highest likelihood of being met.



Strawberry runner production at JCLM Farming

Photo credit: Jack Beattie

## **Toolangi Certified Strawberry Runner Growers Co-operative – George Weda**

The Toolangi Certified Strawberry Runner Growers Co-operative (TCSRGC) was originally formed in 1960 and is the longest serving runner producer in Australia. Today the TCSRGC is comprised of eight grower families dedicated to supplying healthy plants that deliver high profits for fruit growers.

The TCSRGC is located in the Great Dividing Range at Toolangi, Victoria, in a state-declared 'Plant Protection District'. This means that many plants and plant materials (including strawberry fruit) are prohibited from entering the district, and this helps protect against the entry of strawberry pests and pathogens. The high elevation at Toolangi ensures that strawberry plants receive optimum 'chill' for high fruit production. The area is surrounded by state forest, which also acts as a barrier against air-borne pests.

Toolangi was not affected at all by the horrendous fires that gripped the far-eastern parts of Victoria in January 2020. The area has received good levels of rainfall throughout the 2019/20 season. Cooler than average temperatures initially slowed plant development, but reliable rainfall has resulted in good establishment of runners and TCSRGC are looking forward to mild conditions in February to accelerate plant growth.

Runners at TCSRGC are independently certified by the Victorian Strawberry Industry Certification Authority (VSICA). This means that runner production by the TCSRGC must follow VSICA's certification protocols and standards, including planting and rotation practices and pre-plant fumigation with mixtures of methyl bromide and chloropicrin. These protocols are based on best management practices established through extensive scientific research. Highly-trained scientists and staff at VSICA inspect all runner crops grown by the TCSRGC at least three times through the season. VSICA reported that all strawberry crops in the TCSRGC are meeting certification standards in the 2019/20 season. VSICA only issues a Certification label to crops that meet all the standards of the scheme. The Certification label indicates that fruit growers are receiving the healthiest runners possible with the best technologies currently available. For more about the VSICA scheme SEE PAGE 57.

## **Perry Certified Strawberry Runners Growers – Shane Perry**

Perry Certified Strawberry Runner Growers Pty Ltd is owned by Shane and Kerri Perry who are independent runner growers accredited under VSICA. Shane grew up on a commercial strawberry runner farm and made the transition to producing his own certified runners 30 years ago.

They farm 16 acres in Toolangi using a combination of hydroponics under protective igloos and in-soil production following fumigation with methyl bromide.

Planting occurs between August and October avoiding the wet winter period and harvest between March and July each year. Most plants are distributed following harvest; however, a number are frozen and distributed between July and January.

Plants are distributed throughout Australia to home-gardeners, commercial nurseries and commercial fruit growers – the largest being Driscolls.

For a detailed explanation of the VSICA Certification Scheme, please SEE PAGE 57

## **JCLM Farming Pty Ltd - Jack Beattie**

### **ASPAA High Health Accredited Producer**

Based near the small town of Ouse, 95km north west of Hobart, the farm sits at an elevation of 85m with irrigation direct from the Derwent River. The property has an average summer high temperate of 24°C and an average summer low temperate of 9°C and a monthly average rainfall over summer of just under 30mm.

JCLM Farming has established its own mother stock production system over the last three years and can now provide commercial quantities of plants to meet priority orders. The main varieties grown on the 80ha site are: Red Rhapsody, Scarlet Rose, Aussie Gem, Sundrench, Sunglow and Parisienne Kiss for the Australian winter season and Summersong and Scarlet Silk for summer fruit production.

In a point of difference from other propagators, the bare-rooted runners will be supplied in "leaf off" form for two key reasons:

- Lower plant mortality at establishment
- Cost efficiencies with logistics

## Sweet's Strawberry Runners – Wally Sweet

### ASPAA High Health Accredited Producer

It has been widely acknowledged that the Granite Belt has been in the grip of a severe drought with only 25% of the average annual rainfall in 2019. Additionally, 12 of the last 15 months have been in the top 10% of hottest months on record and numerous storms incorporating hail have added to the challenges.

To mitigate these challenges Sweet's Strawberry Runners have implemented a runner and plug growing program across four separate sites to ensure customer requirements can be met in terms of meeting plant priority orders.

1. An audit at the end of the 2019 season of water availability at Yarrabee (south-west of Stanthorpe), indicated that there was a suitable amount of irrigation water for approximately 15% of production for the 2019/20 season. This site is part of the main farm and therefore located closest to the processing infrastructure and business administrative centre which has made management at this site the simplest.
2. A leased property at Texas on the NSW-QLD border has plentiful and good quality irrigation water supplied from the Dumaresq River.
3. A leased property on the Acacia Plateau (approximately 40km south-east of Warwick) on the NSW-QLD border has been transformed from a grazing paddock into strawberry runner production. The location of the farm was specifically chosen due to its mild summer temperatures and adequate irrigation water supplies.
4. Strawberry plug (seedling) production has continued in 2020 at Spring Creek Seedlings, located just west of Stanthorpe. Two reverse osmosis units and strict biosecurity have ensured the healthy establishment of runners from mother plants. The plugs will be produced from these runners in readiness for winter planting by fruit producers in March.

Despite extremely difficult climatic conditions, Sweet's Strawberry Runners remain confident around delivery of priority orders for the 2020 season.

## Red Jewel – Ian Mungall

Following a difficult 2019 runner season on the Granite Belt which saw prolonged drought conditions resulting in reduced plant numbers and significant water cartage costs to finish the season, Red Jewel made the decision to relocate a large portion of their business away from the Granite Belt until such time as sufficient water becomes available at our bareroot runner operation at Ballandean.

Red Jewel made the decision to expand their plug plant operation and established a new specialised plug plant operation near Armidale on the NSW New England tablelands. The site was chosen because of its temperate climate and abundant supply of good quality irrigation water from Commissioner's Waters which is a tributary of the Gara River. Being located at over 1000m of altitude provides cool nights in conjunction with a high solar exposure which ensures that plants have an optimum growing environment prior to being dispatched to growers for early fruit production.

The greenfield site was transformed with the installation of a number of screen houses and two climate controlled Cravo greenhouses and associated processing facilities for the production of strawberry plug plants. With automated ventilation of roof and side walls and an investment in a state-of-the-art irrigation facility, the Cravo greenhouses ensure the climate within the greenhouses is maintained at an ideal growing environment to ensure optimum growth of mother-stock and plug plants.

Along with the plug plants mother-stock, Red Jewel now produces all of its foundation (F1) and foundation increase (F2) plant stock in substrate systems resulting in only the final year's production of bareroot runners being produced in the soil minimising the potential for soil borne disease to infect the plants and ensuring the highest quality of plants are supplied to growers.

2020 will see the first commercial quantities of plug plants produced from the site with plant tip's being set in February in readiness for distribution to fruit growers in March /April. Only limited quantities of bare-rooted runner plants will be produced at the Armidale site this year and Red Jewel anticipates bareroot runner production returning in full to their Ballandean site in the spring of 2021 with good rains received in the past weeks.

The production of plug plants in a protected cropping system not only produces a more uniform plant but also significantly reduces the risks associated with the variable climate effects on both bareroot runner production and subsequent planting in fruiting fields.

# AUSTRALIAN STRAWBERRY PROPAGATORS ACCREDITATION AUTHORITY (ASPAA)

John Chapman

ASPAA commenced formally operating in 2016 as a Limited Liability Company with the aim of providing strawberry growers with disease free planting material of good agronomic quality.

Members of the company are Propagators and the Queensland Strawberry Growers Association (QSGA). The company is currently run by a Board comprising two Propagators, two Members of the QSGA Executive and an independent Chair.

Propagator members are guided by the Australian Strawberry Propagators Accreditation Scheme Document that lays down operational guidelines for the production of strawberry plants for distribution to fruit growers.

These guidelines provide the basis for an annual audit of each Propagator at the start of the Queensland planting season that ensures maintenance of the original accreditation and provides certification of plants for the coming season.

An accreditation certificate is issued after the initial audit and a certification certificate is issued annually following a successful audit. The audit may reveal issues that need fixing and this is subject to a Corrective Action Report (CAR) that gives the propagator time to fix the problem.

If a major issue cannot be fixed then a portion of or all plants produced may not be certified for that season. A fruit grower client must be informed of this and agree to accept the plants that are out of standard.

The major change for ASPAA in 2019 has been the increasing interest in Plug Plant production that required a rewrite of the Accreditation Scheme document plus an update of the company constitution. A greater than usual number of enquiries have been received regarding becoming a member of ASPAA and achieving accreditation.

ASPAA also has taken responsibility for organising minor use permits for pesticides (particularly fungicides) with the Australian Pesticide and Veterinary Medicine Authority (APVMA) assisted by Hort Innovation.

**For further information contact  
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**Runner plants at Red Jewel**

Photo credit: Roger Broadley