

Masterclass delivered more than expected for learner farmers

Catherine Gale-Stanton, Tasmanian Institute of Agriculture

From suburban permaculture enthusiasts to commercial blueberry farmers, Cathryn Maloney and David Wareing embarked on a steep learning curve when they decided to take on Old Beach Berries in Tasmania.



Cathryn Maloney from Old Beach Berries.

Photo credit: Cathryn Maloney

And before they had even clocked up 12 months as the new owners of Old Beach Berries, at Old Beach in Tasmania's south, Cathryn had enrolled in a Masterclass in Horticultural Business offered through the Tasmanian Institute of Agriculture, a learning experience that she says delivered so much more than she expected.

Both allied health workers, the couple had plans to move from Hobart's northern suburbs to a bigger property when Old Beach Berries came onto the market.

"It just happened that I had worked with one of the people who owned it. So, I contacted her, and it went from there," Cathryn said.

"We had planned to become more rural, not necessarily farmers, but it just seemed right at the time. It came up serendipitously, and it wasn't too far from town, so we could still do our other jobs."

Saying goodbye to their quarter acre block that was home to a permaculture vegie garden, Cathryn and David moved in November 2019, and quickly launched into their first season "without really knowing what we were doing".

"There was a lot of maintenance work that needed to be done very quickly," Cathryn said.

"The previous owners put us in touch with some of their best workers who were happy to continue to work with us, so we employed one of them in a supervisory role. We did the best we could with that season – and got through it.

"Looking back, I think it is amazing that we did what we did, we knew so little, and that is where the course helped so much."

The Masterclass in Horticultural Business is designed for people who are working in the horticultural industry to increase their agribusiness skills and gain a formal qualification.

It has been developed with the input from many of Australia's current industry leaders and academics from Lincoln University (NZ), providing participants with knowledge and skills to grow their horticulture careers.

Cathryn joined the course in June 2020 and had done half the course by the time the next season arrived.

"It really helped us with everything we had to have in place for the next season, but also all the tools we were introduced to, in terms of risk assessment, change management, and SWOT analysis. Which is a massive help with all the business planning and crunching the numbers." Cathryn said she found the peer-to-peer learning via farm tours (virtual during the pandemic) was a highlight, while the generous information shared by other horticulture business owners was informative.

"The virtual farm tours I found 1000 times more useful than I expected," Cathryn said. "They were open and shared mistakes they made early on. "To know that multi-million-dollar businesses initially over capitalised but bounced back; there was so much applicability in what people were saying. Things that just resonated with us. "One of them said you've got to maintain your culture - the culture that you want to have. "And ours is we want to be welcoming, we want to have people of all abilities, nationalities, anyone is welcome on our farm. We want to have a sense of fun. He said: maintain that and employ people who align with that culture."

The modules on people management were also a highlight for Cathryn, while an assignment on industry trends, helped her to understand where Old Beach Berries sat locally and globally.

"People want to know where their food comes from, and they want to have less sprays on their food," Cathryn said. "We are much smaller, so our point of difference is that we are a premium quality berry, a lot more of us are chemical free, or spray free, which a lot of consumers want. "At a couple of the virtual farm tours, the owners kept saying if you are small you have got to have that point of difference and usually it is going to be your quality, and your customer connections. "We talk to most of our customers personally, so that was really good for us. "Our brand is that 'we are your local farm.' You can come and pick berries, you can come and pick up berries or eggs after work, and you can bring your kids. That really fits for us."

While the farm's 70 chickens are great pest controllers, Cathryn said they are also using organic practices across the 6.1-hectares of blueberries, cherries, and olives, with a plan to apply for organic certification next season.

"We are using a biological approach to the farming. We are using organic fertilisers and we don't use any pesticides or herbicides at all," Cathryn said.

"We have had a massive yield this year. The number of berries and the size of the berries - we are anticipating the same for next year. So, that is down to the system we are using.

"The more we can build up the soil the healthier the bushes will be, the healthier the berries will be and that benefits everybody."

Neighbouring farmers and participants in the virtual farm tours offered through the masterclass Coaldale Walnuts shared their experience with soil.

"They said soil is your first thing," Cathryn said. "It all starts with the soil. So, it is nice to hear we are on the right track. And other things we are still learning.

"It was a great course, a great experience and great people.

"When I put in my application, I said to David "we'll learn how to prune!"

"The focus is not on the horticultural side so much, although that did come into it, but it was just so much more than I expected."

The Masterclass in Horticultural Business, funded by Hort Innovation, has helped professionals from across the country turn their business ideas into actionable business plans, so that they are ready to overcome challenges and reach their full potential.

The Strawberry Strategic Industry Advisory Panel has just announced it will fund two 50% scholarships per year for three years valued at \$4000 each.

Recipients of a scholarship are required to:

- complete the course within two years,
- deliver a presentation about the scholarship and outcomes at either an industry relevant conference or in the industry magazine as agreed with the Hort Innovation representative.

For further information and details on how to apply visit: Masterclass in Horticultural Business | Tasmanian Institute of Agriculture (bit.ly/MHB-UTAS)

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