

Profile:

Roly & Jemma Mackinnon, Mountford Berries, Tasmania

Mark Salter, Berry Industry Development Officer, Fruit Growers Tasmania

Roly and his family run a mixed farming enterprise at Longford in the states' north. Roly started his working life on the farm alongside his brother and father Hugh. During that early stage the farm produced livestock and cropping. It was 10 years later, after a chance meeting with Simon Dornauf from Hillwood Berries who was growing berries for Driscoll's, that Roly decided to also consider growing berries. It was good timing as the Mountford farming business was looking to diversify and berries looked like a good fit.

Roly believed they had a suitable site on the farm to grow berries and decided to plant 4 hectares of in-ground strawberries in tunnels. After a very challenging second year growing strawberries due mainly to pest pressure, the Mackinnon's decided to move all their plantings onto tables and into substrate, which improved pest and disease control and increased productivity. Roly admits the move to berries was very challenging in the early years, but it is now paying dividends as the farm has expanded their strawberry plantings as well as now growing raspberries and blackberries all in tunnels.

Currently the farm has 20 hectares of the Driscoll's strawberry variety *Amesti* grown on tabletops, with a mix of double and single tables.

Roly explains the single tables are more suited to some of the newer strawberry varieties. They also grow 4 hectares of the Driscoll's raspberry variety *Maravilla* and 3 hectares of blackberry varieties *Elvira* and *Victoria*, all grow in substrate and in pots.

The berries are fed hydroponically through four Priva automated irrigation controllers. The Priva units adjust the irrigation nutrient mixes throughout the production cycle depending on growth stage of the plant. Water is accessed from the South Esk river which is a reliable source of clean water and pumped straight into on-farm storage.

Labour

Roly states one of the biggest challenges is to have an even crop over the season and to spread out the harvest to help with labour management. Jemma is the HR Manager, and she explains that accessing sufficient labour for the 6–7-month harvest period is a major challenge.

Mountford Berries are an Approved Employer through the Pacific Australian Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme. The company employs over 150 seasonal workers and sources most of their harvest crew from Timor-Leste, Tonga, and Vanuatu. Jemma says the planning process begins well before the season starts with an extensive workforce plan which includes the harvest crew, supervisors, drivers, and management staff.

Planning early helps to ensure the company has adequate staff numbers throughout the full season. The planning process is particularly important as there is a minimum 10-week lead time to source harvest labour through the Seasonal Worker Program. The Mackinnon's put great emphasis on maintaining a close relationship with their staff and regularly travel to the Pacific Islands to meet their crew.

The last few years they have focused their recruitment program on Timor-Leste, recently undertaking a 10-day trip to visit some of some of their current workers and to explore the potential to expand their work force.

Joly & Jemma Mackinnon from Mounford Berries.

Photo credit: Mounford Berries



Bumper raspberry crop developing.

Photo credit: Mounford Berries



Mounford Berries grows strawberries and Rubus in tunnels at the property near Longford in the northern midlands of Tasmania.

Photo credit: Mounford Berries



Strawberries growing on tabletops in the tunnel system.

Photo credit: Mounford Berries



Seasonal workers through the PALM scheme provide a large proportion of the harvest labour required.

Photo credit: Mounford Berries



During their recent trip, Jemma says it was great to see what some of their workers have achieved in their own country, including building better homes, education facilities and supporting extended families.

Some have also developed small businesses and are now employing staff of their own. Jemma also explains it is critical for their business to have a reliable source of returning workers, as having them already trained and with prior experience makes the harvest process much more efficient.

Mountford Berries also have a core group of locals that make up their non-harvest staff. Roly makes the point that without the PALM scheme he would not be confident to expand and employ more people including locals.

Accommodation is a major consideration particularly when employing through the PALM scheme. To cater for their harvest workers Mountford Berries have built on-site accommodation and lease a number of houses in Longford and the surrounding area.

Marketing

All berries produced on the farm are marketed through the Driscoll's marketing program, which suits Roly as it allows him more time to concentrate on growing and managing the production aspects of the farm.

Challenges

The major challenges include:

- The sourcing and cost of labour, particularly for berries which are very labour intensive
- Rising cost of inputs
- Public perception with plastic and disposal, and the current lack of recycling facilities available to handle waste plastic
- Red tape, particularly from local council
- Access to suitable accommodation

Future

Roly and Jemma both agree there are many challenges, but the future looks bright for Mountford Berries. Rather than expanding further they think now is the right time to consolidate, particularly after a few years of heavy investment. Roly explains their current focus is on getting the basics right, particularly growing and harvesting the crop.



Worker profile: Tarcisio from Timor-Leste

Tarcisio has been working with us, seasonally, since 2018. He is 30 years old and supports his family at home in Timor-Leste.

Tarcisio is very passionate about his home country and wants to provide for his family for years to come. He has built a home for his parents in Suai which is near completion. This was possible due to his placement at Mountford Berries with the PALM Scheme. Tarcisio works in Australia for Australian wages and saves his money to send home to better his and his family's lives.

During his time in Australia, he has learnt leadership and responsibility and takes that back to Timor-Leste along with the work ethic that he probably brought over with him!

Tarcisio understands that he cannot work in Australia forever and so he has been setting himself up so that once he has finished with us at Mountford Berries, hopefully in 10 years' time, he has an income in Timor-Leste. He has started a printing and technology hire business in Dili, Timor-Leste's capital city. The business involves hiring out equipment, printing documents, taking drivers' licence photos, screen printing logos onto clothing, and typing up documents for people. This is all to give an income to his wife and for him to have a job while he is back at home during the off season.

The business was going so well that he was able to also provide his brother a job as well as one other local person from the community. Tarcisio not only is providing for himself and his family, but he is creating a circle of wealth within the community in Timor-Leste.

We feel so much joy being able to go over to Timor-Leste and see where all the hard work of our staff is going and just how much it is enriching their lives is amazing to see firsthand. We look forward to our relationship with the Pacific and Timor-Leste growing into the future.