

Berry patch concept essential to drive retail sales

Ashley Walmsley, Editor, Good Fruit & Vegetables

A “berry patch” in supermarkets could be the secret to lifting sales in Australia, according to experts. The concept of the “berry patch” was given airtime at BerryQuest International 2022 held on the Gold Coast from 25-28 July 2022.

The ‘berry patch’ means a display of all types of berries in one area within a supermarket or greengrocer. Live streamed from California, Driscoll’s America president Soren Bjorn said seeing a full berry patch was incredibly powerful for retailers. “If you can get consumers to buy all four berries, they come to the source with much greater frequency,” Mr Bjorn said.

He said it was about enticing shoppers to buy two different types of berries, with the hope this would grow to purchasing three or four types in one trip. The rise of berries as a category ensures presence (shelf space) and promotability, according to Mr Bjorn. The berry patch idea has been heavily pushed in the US by companies such as Driscoll’s, with some supermarkets in Australia also cottoning onto the trend.

Another live-streamed international speaker, Hortifrut SA chief executive officer Juan Allende echoed those thoughts. “Quality, consistency and year-round availability drives demand,” he said.

Mr Allende said there were new players entering the berry market which meant working together would be key. “There is not enough collaboration within the industry. There are some very good opportunities to do that,” Mr Allende said. “Trust and network are probably the most important assets of this business.”

Berries Australia Executive Director Rachel Mackenzie said the “berry patch” concept stood out for her as an avenue to pursue for the national body. “That’s something we at Berries Australia should focus on. We are fortunate to represent the whole berry basket,” Ms Mackenzie said. “How can we market that better to deliver more returns back to all of you (the growers)?”

Both speakers acknowledged there were still some points of resistance and challenges with lifting berry consumption. “We still have areas where berries are a little marginal,” Mr Bjorn said.

Mr Allende said there was “still a lot of work to do” when it came to the improved marketing of berries. He also said most berry supply chains were inefficient, and called for a greater focus on greener credentials. “We all talk about sustainability, but we need to do more about it,” he said. “Genetics in general today; there are several programs which are very good. They will be valuable in battling some of these challenges we have.”

While new berry breeding goes on, Mr Allende said an eye should be kept on companies who may not be playing the game correctly. “We are seeing in some countries the protection of intellectual property is not as it should be,” he said.

The blues all year round

Australia should capitalise on its ability to produce blueberries for 52 weeks of the year. This was another of the recommendations to come from speakers at BerryQuest International 2022. Driscoll’s America Soren Bjorn told the audience there was tremendous value in a consistent supply. “It makes a big difference if you can buy something every week and if you can just sometimes buy them,” Mr Bjorn said. He showed figures from the US industry supporting his call that year-round availability created value. “The higher the income in the household, the higher the berry consumption,” Mr Bjorn said.

Berries Australia chair Peter McPherson delivered statistics on the blueberry industry saying blueberry sale volumes have grown by 20 per cent since 2012. However, the sector experienced a sales price decrease of 4.5 per cent per year during the same period. The growth in volume came from regional expansion and gains from genetically improved varieties.

Mr McPherson said it was a notable achievement that Australia was the first country in the world to do 52 weeks of blueberry production. In addressing the Australian industry specifically, Mr Bjorn said there was a lot to be confident about. "You have some big problems to solve but you're not alone. You may be on the forefront of activity on climate change," he said.

He said high prices at the retail level were "really bad" for the category, driving people away. He reinforced the idea of getting a berry patch in prominence up the front of major stores.

Mr Allende was also hopeful of Australia's berry-growing capacity. "Australia has such a great reputation for food," he said. "The year-round factor is very important. As you continue to develop that great reputation you have and more and better genetics." While having berries available was one thing, quality of fruit was also imperative. "Long gone are the days of late season, really poor varieties just to have them available," Mr Bjorn said.

He said flavour was the number one driver for berry purchases, followed by freshness, then price. Mr Bjorn said Driscoll's research had shown that a bad blackberry eating experience meant the consumer would not come back to purchase again for four months.

Acknowledgements

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There are benefits for both the industry, and the retailers, in presenting various types of berries in one display. Photo credit: Ashley Walmsley



Hortifrut SA Chief Executive Officer Juan Allende, Chile (left on screen) and Driscoll's America President Soren Bjorn, US (right on screen), taking questions from the floor at BerryQuest International 2022, facilitated by Berries Australia chair, Peter McPherson. Photo credit: Ashley Walmsley



Berries Australia Chairman Peter McPherson says blueberries have experienced a remarkable climb in value over the past decade. Photo credit: Ashley Walmsley



The audience tunes into one of the sessions at BerryQuest International 2022 held at Sea World Resort, Gold Coast, Qld. Photo credit: Ashley Walmsley