

Grower Profile : Murrakei Farms, Tasmania

Mark Salter, Berry Industry Development Officer, Fruit Growers Tasmania

Tamara and her family run “Murrakei” a mixed farming enterprise at Red Hills near Deloraine in Tasmania’s northwest and have been farming in the area for the last 100 years. Tamara is the eldest of four and after travelling overseas for a brief period, returned home to study ag science at the University of Tasmania (UTAS). While she was studying, her family was approached by Driscoll’s to consider growing berries. After much discussion with her family, Tamara and her parents took up the berry challenge and she juggled the last few years of her studies helping to establish the berry business. After gaining her honours at UTAS she has dedicated her time to managing the berry business full-time.



Murrakei Farms — the tunnels currently cover 14 hectares with more to come. Photo credit: Tamara Clark, Murrakei Farms

Production

Murrakei Farms produce both strawberries and raspberries grown in substrate under Haygrove tunnels. The farm currently has 10 hectares of the Driscoll's strawberry variety Amesti which are grown on tabletops and four hectares of the Driscoll's raspberry variety Maravilla which are grown in pots. Both strawberries and raspberries are fed hydroponically through two Priva automated controllers. The Priva units adjust nutrient mixes throughout the production cycle depending on the growth stage the plant. Water is sourced from farm bores providing exceptionally clean water with a low EC of 0.2, ideal for hydroponic production.

Tamara explains the fruit is picked and packed in the field, and this process works well for them as fruit handling is kept to a minimum and alleviates the need for a dedicated packing shed.

After the fruit is harvested it is transferred directly to the cool room to remove the field heat and from there the fruit is transported to local and interstate markets.

Tamara is constantly looking at ways to minimise her chemical use and is keen to adopt the latest IPM techniques and principles to promote natural predators and pollinators. She also has a program to introduce other beneficial insects to control pests like Two-spotted mite. Tamara freely admits her pest and disease program runs a slightly higher threshold for pest damage to try to keep the right balance between beneficial insects and pests.

Labour

Tamara – just like most berry producers – highlights that a stable source of labour has been critical particularly over the last season with the escalating COVID outbreaks creating very challenging times.

Fortunately, Murrakei is an Approved Employer with the Seasonal Worker Program (now PALM) and directly employs labour through the program making the job of recruiting much easier.

They have also established accommodation onsite, which Tamara sees as a big plus making the management of staff much more streamlined and meaning staff are readily available when needed.

Tamara also employs a crew from the local Bhutanese community for planting and other activities throughout the year. She shares the crew with another local berry farm enabling the workers to have employment over an extended period and giving both farms the flexibility to employ a stable and returning work force.

Locals make up the positions of her permanent staff. Tamara is keen to mentor her key permanent staff and provides them with the opportunity for further education and training.

She adds “any business is only as good as the people in it” and is keen to pass on responsibility to her key staff allowing her to attend to other activities.



Long cane raspberries grown in Haygrove tunnel structures at Murrakei Farms. Photo credit: Tamara Clark, Murrakei Farms

Marketing

Selling your berries once they are grown requires a whole different set of skills and all berries produced at Murrakei are marketed through the Driscoll's marketing program, which suits Tamara as it allows her more time to concentrate on growing and managing other aspects of the farm.

Challenges and the future

Tamara believes there are many challenges facing the berry industry including:

- the source and cost of labour, particularly for berries which are very labour intensive
- rising input costs including fertiliser, chemicals, packaging, fuel and transport
- getting access to materials e.g. plastic for tunnels, packaging, or growing media
- sustainability and environmental impacts

Although there are many challenges, Tamara sees a bright future for the family berry business. Murrakei are expanding berry production with more tunnels planned for this year and into the future. While growing the business, Tamara also has a big focus on developing her management team as the business grows. They have also established accommodation onsite, which Tamara sees as a big plus making the management of staff much more streamlined and meaning staff are readily available when needed.

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Murrakei Farms 
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Tamara Clark. Photo credit: Tamara Clark, Murrakei Farms



All strawberries at Murrakei are grown in substrate bags on tabletops under tunnels.

Photo credit: Tamara Clark, Murrakei Farms