

# Profile: Parvinder Lalli, NSW

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It is overcast as I drive into Parvinder's farm. The neat rows of raspberries greet you at the front and you can't help but notice the massive Cravo set-up as you pull up to his house. These crops are well protected from the elements, unlike me, as I hurry to find shelter from the incoming weather event. I find Parvinder walking to his work shed carrying some chains for his 'leg-row' mower. Being a farmer definitely means being a 'jack of all trades'; growing, harvesting, quality checking, equipment maintenance, people management are all in a day's work. We proceed into his well-built semi-alfresco living room where we get down to some serious berry business.

Parvinder's parents arrived in the Coffs Harbour area in the late 1960s, where like many other farmers in the community they started banana farming around Woolgoolga. The local banana industry went through some hard times in the late 80s to 90s, which pushed Parvinder towards the hospitality industry. It was always his intention to return to his farming roots, and when the opportunity arose, he purchased his first farm from his parents in 2003.

As blueberry development started to grow in the region, he rode the early wave by removing a few blocks of the existing bananas and planting his first crop of blueberries. Fast-forward to 2010, after a few good years of berry business and highway acquisitions, Parvinder purchased his current farm. Stepping outside his comfort zone and doing something different has provided the opportunity for Parvinder to be one of the first few growers in the region to start growing raspberries and blackberries.

The first raspberry crop was planted in 2015, followed by the first blackberry crop in 2017. Parvinder was also one of the first few growers to adopt the Priva water management systems and Groscale technology in the region.

The system has assisted him in monitoring and controlling plant moisture usage and regulating pot moisture going into the evening. This is quintessential for the control of sooty mould in raspberries. Parvinder's latest technological investment has been a Cravo retractable roof system in 2020, which allows him to regulate airflow and temperature, creating a more desirable microclimate for plant growth and pollination.

Looking around the property, things have changed drastically over the years. All ground grown; netted berries have given way to protected cropping. The diversification into other berries and other crops is a response to the evolving landscape in a maturing berry industry.



**Block currently planted to substrate with protected blueberries (April 2023).** Photo credit: Gaius Leong



**Block planted to blackberries (September 2020).**

Photo credit: Gaius Leong



**Block planted to raspberries (March 2016).**

Photo credit: Gaius Leong

Being able to read and understand the market demand, adapt to the conditions and execute the changes required are key markers for success in this demanding sector. Diversification has also provided a steady income stream and enabled the retention of skilled labour through the entire season.

The unpredictability of weather events can always put a big dent in even the most well-developed production plans. A devastating hailstorm in 2016 and the last few seasons of wet weather (which increased disease pressure and made harvesting netted berries impossible) are key moments that have propelled Parvinder towards adopting a full protected cropping approach.

Achieving production consistency in quality and timing is paramount in satisfying both retail and consumer demands. Even though disease pressure has dropped off significantly in the new system, pest pressure is still an issue that requires attention in protected cropping.

When transferring to protected cropping, Parvinder points out the importance of understanding the difference in plastic range and quality. Allowing adequate photosynthetic active radiation (PAR) and light diffusion to reach the crop will heavily affect plant growth and eventual yields. In addition, achieving adequate airflow and ground cover at specific times under protected cropping reduces pest and disease pressure. In a nutshell, protected cropping provides a good framework for achieving consistency in production, however, if not executed correctly, can lead to detrimental effects on plant growth and yield.

For the future, Parvinder is exploring the opportunity of installing a closed re-circulation system that will enable the capture and re-use of nutrition run-off, thus reducing environmental impacts and increasing fertiliser use efficiency.

As I prepare to take my leave, Parvinder provides some insight and wisdom.

**Firstly, a quote from Roman philosopher Seneca: ‘luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity’. Secondly, ‘have the right infrastructure, but do not over capitalise’.**

I wish Parvinder the best of ‘preparation and opportunity’ in his future endeavours.



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