

A home for every piece of fruit

Wendy Morris, Berry Industry Development Officer, Queensland

All too often, fruit that doesn't meet retail specifications ends up rotting in the field or being dumped before ever leaving the farm. For Stuart and Allison McGruddy, seeing perfectly edible fruit go to waste was both a source of frustration and the inspiration for a business.

Working out of Caboolture, in the heart of berry territory in South East Queensland, My Berries collects surplus strawberries, raspberries and blackberries direct from local farms and processes them into frozen and freeze-dried products ready for both retail and wholesale sales channels. My Berries also sources surplus blueberries from New South Wales, mangoes from the Northern Territory and Queensland, and bananas from Central Queensland. All the products are processed, quality checked and packed into retail pouches or manufacturing grade cartons, proudly emblazoned with their 'Aussie Grown' My Berries brand and shipped out via third party distributors or in some cases, direct to the retailer distribution centres.



The current My Berries frozen fruit retail range.

Photo credit: My Berries

My Berries sells their value-added products to more than 1,000 independent retailers across Australia and overseas, plus wholesales bulk product to leading food manufacturers. The inclusion of big names such as Weiss, Arnott's and Beerenberg is a sure sign that quality and reliability are hallmarks of their business.

My Berries has grown dramatically since Jane Richter first interviewed Stuart on behalf of the Australian Blueberry Grower's Association in 2018 (you can read the original story at bit.ly/ABJ-Aut18). Talking to Stuart about the changes since then, it's evident there has been a lot of hard work, learning and growth, liberally sprinkled with calculated risk taking.

While fellow Australian berry processors were closing their doors, Stuart and Allison sought advice from business mentors and leaders in manufacturing who gave them the confidence to forge ahead and back themselves. Listening to their story, it is very clear that actively seeking out assistance whether that be advice or grants has been important in their journey to date. Business mentorship is available in many guises and the local Chamber of Commerce or Council is often a great place to start.

In the last two years, My Berries has invested heavily in expanding its processing facilities by designing one large, streamlined manufacturing area. Upgrades include new processing machinery, automated packing lines, more freezer space and a larger area to improve workflow. The business has also secured more space in the industrial unit complex where it is based, providing room for the business to grow.



My Berries has invested in automation and better packaging capability to support the ongoing expansion.

Photo credit: Jane Richter

My Berries’ mission is to find a home for every piece of fruit local farmers produce in peak season. Expanding and automating facilities is bringing them closer to realising this ambitious goal. By offering growers a profitable and value-added solution for their surplus fruit, they have been able to steadily increase their buying power and the tonnages processed year on year, as well as provide a more reliable supply to their downstream customer base.

More fruit means more staff. Sourcing labour is a headache that many growers can relate to and post-pandemic, Stuart and Allison have focused on local recruitment, retention and upskilling, so they are less reliant on working holiday makers. They also understand that a supportive and inclusive working environment leads to happy workers who are passionately invested in helping the business to succeed, and this is evident in the low levels of staff turnover.

When asked if Covid saw an increase in Australian food manufacturers seeking processed fruit for their products, Stuart advised that there was a temporary increase in demand before overseas products became available again, and manufacturers returned to cheaper products. But this, at My Berries, is part of the natural ebb and flow. There are always new opportunities.

Since our last catch up, the company has also invested in rebranding, and the packaging has gone from practical to enticing. With the business now more established, Stuart and Allison have been able to identify their core consumers and target their marketing accordingly. Overall, today’s image is fresh, bright and inviting. It speaks to everyone from the Bondi mums who make smoothies to inner city consumers wanting a healthy, low-calorie portable snack to get them through the afternoon.



The business has its own truck collecting fruit direct from farms in the local area. Photo credit: Jane Richter

Branding is just one way to get more Australian grown frozen fruits on supermarket shelves. In 2020, Stuart successfully applied for a Hort Innovation Churchill Fellowship to build on the knowledge, experience and technology used in the freezing of whole soft berry fruits. These fellowships are offered annually to cultivate new ideas and drive transformation within Australia's horticultural industry.

Overseas, significantly less seasonal produce is wasted, and Stuart wanted to explore why. After Covid delays, Stuart recently returned from his research trip to processing facilities in Poland, Spain, the USA and Chile. An interesting take-away from European farms was the larger number of processors capable of transforming lower grades of fruit into value-added products. This meant fruit did not need to travel as far, reducing freight costs, and in turn making processing grade fruit more financially viable. Likewise in the USA, mechanical picking was used to harvest raspberries that are grown specifically for the frozen market and

bound for processing, which dramatically reduced harvest costs. Stuart's full report has been submitted to the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust and is now available on churchilltrust.com.au.

The trip made Stuart acutely aware of how important it is to reduce barriers for growers to get involved. My Berries will be trialling new collection trays to make it even easier to collect, transport and freeze processing grade fruit. The business believes grower backed solutions are the key to reducing food waste and are keen to build relationships with farmers, and to continue to identify and remove barriers in the supply chain.

Stuart's final piece of advice to anyone who is undertaking a business journey is a Winston Churchill quote; **'You will never reach your destination if you stop and throw stones at every dog that barks'**. Great words from a processor who has managed to thrive in what has been proven to be an extremely challenging market.

My Berries are open for business – if you are a berry grower and would like to chat with the team about processing grade fruit options, please contact:

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