

Australian Horticulture's latest Nuffield Scholar is destined for great things

Jane Richter, Communication Manager, Berries Australia

Whilst visiting Tasmania in mid-November with the Berries Australia team, I had the privilege to spend an hour with the latest Australia Nuffield Scholar – Kirsty Dickenson from Costa Berries based in Northdown on the central northern coast. She is embarking on an incredible adventure, and we will be following her throughout the next two years as she completes her scholarship project.

Kirsty grew up in an area of Hobart that backed on to bushland and so along with her many siblings she was an outdoor kid. When I say many siblings I mean it – Kirsty is unbelievably one of 18 children meaning there was always something going on and you were never lonely. When she was growing up her first intention was to become a doctor, but as she progressed through school and understood more about what a career in medicine really meant she quickly realised a life spent indoors was not going to work for her.

Typifying Kirsty's practical and solution-oriented approach, as she got older she did a series of work experience placements to try different things on for size which helped her to rule out a lot of things!

When she went to tackle Year 11, there was a program known as PICSE which was aiming to get kids who were interested in science to consider agriculture as a viable career pathway. The School of Agricultural Science (UTAS) established the National Primary Industry Centre for Science Education (PICSE) in 1998 to develop and deliver strategies to encourage more young people to enter primary industry and associated research and agribusiness organisations. PICSE is collaboration between agencies, universities, their regional

communities and local primary industries. Funding for PICSE has come from a blend of Federal Government, partner universities, and national R&D Corporations including Hort Innovation.

Kirsty started the program as part of her Year 11 studies and quickly realised it ticked both her boxes; it was the science area that she was interested in and involved working outside. She continued the program in Year 12 and had the opportunity to study sustainability up in the Riverland – a region that covers an area of 9,386 square kilometres along the river Murray from where it flows into South Australia from New South Wales and Victoria. This was the final piece of the puzzle for Kirsty.

"I thought this marries everything that I want to do in my career," she said and from there she enrolled in a Bachelor of Agriculture at the University of Tasmania (UTAS).

Like many young Australians, after completing her degree the lure of adventure beckoned and she had a couple of gap years experiencing some incredible parts of the world including South America, South East Asia and Iceland.

Upon her return, Kirsty's first role was in the grains industry in South Australia where she worked mostly in isolation. Being from such a large family she quickly realised that for her to thrive she wanted to be an active part of a larger team with plenty of daily engagement with other team members. She joined Costa in 2018 as a Horticultural Technical Assistant and in 2020 she completed the University of Tasmania's Graduate Diploma in Agribusiness: Masterclass in Horticultural Business. This post-graduate course offers participants immersive study that will ultimately make them a better businessperson. The Masterclass in Horticultural Business equips current and future farm managers, owners and employers with the agribusiness skills and capabilities required to run profitable and sustainable farm businesses.



You can find out more about this course at bit.ly/UTAS-Hort-Bus or scan this QR code

Kirsty is now a Horticulturalist with responsibilities across both the raspberry and avocado businesses within Costa on the northwest coast of Tasmania. Her role has expanded to include not only pest and disease management, but R&D, pollination for the region, canopy management and capital project development and execution.

Tasmania is the only state where Costa currently grows all four main berry types which makes the Apple Isle a key part of Costa's ability to supply quality berries year-round. The Northdown site where Kirsty is based grows 85 hectares of just raspberries, spread across two of Driscoll's varieties 'Maravilla' and 'Yazmin'.

It is abundantly clear from listening to Kirsty tell her story that she thrives on challenge, and her last couple of years at Costa - where the site has undergone significant changes - have allowed her to swim hard where others may have sunk. She has a maturity in her attitude that seems way beyond her years and gives me great confidence that the future of the berry industry in Australia is in safe hands with emerging young leaders like Kirsty.

About twelve months ago, Kirsty felt that she had gotten to the point in her career where she had established a strong base point of knowledge but she was starting to have a larger set of questions that her peers and mentors could not readily answer.

She read that Hort Innovation was offering funding support for a Rubus grower to pursue an Australian Nuffield Scholarship and several of her peers suggested she should go for it. Kirsty is naturally a reserved person and was daunted by the 'public spotlight' component that is involved with a Nuffield Scholarship.

"I have so many questions and I'd love to get out there and talk to people to find out how they are approaching the challenges that we're facing, like a maturing market," says Kirsty. It was only following a conversation with friend and 2018 Nuffield Australia Scholar Robin Tait, that Kirsty felt emboldened to submit an application.

The selection process is certainly thorough; following submission of your written application you undertake a state-based interview with a panel, and if successful you then go forward to a three-part interview at the national level. If you are successful on the national stage, then you are awarded a Nuffield Scholarship and the real work begins.



The point of the Nuffield is for someone from an industry to go out into the world, explore relevant topics for their industry and come back to share that knowledge, explains Kirsty.

The benefits are already flowing in for Kirsty. You are joining an established network of like-minded, curious individuals and she has met a number of other 'Nuffielders' already, some of whom have been to stay with her in northern Tasmania.

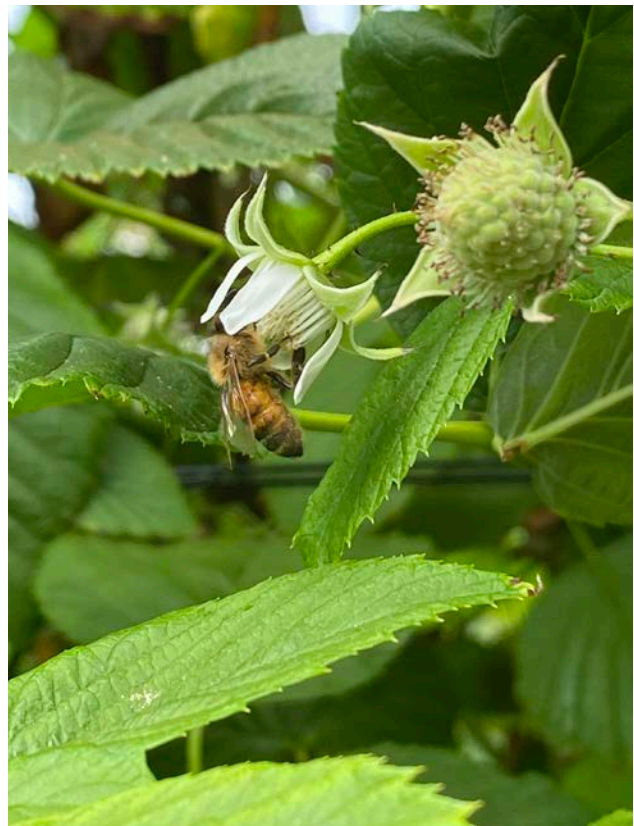
Kirsty is seeking to find answers to the highly topical question of how we nurture resource sustainability in a rapidly maturing market. Costa is a large berry producer and with scale comes a responsibility to take a leadership role in tackling industry challenges. She is currently in the scoping phase of her project where she is refining the focus to ensure that she has a clear set of questions to answer as she travels during 2024.



All raspberries on site are grown in substrate in a range of polytunnel designs. Photos credit: Jane Richter



Kirsty Dickenson showing off the delicious fresh raspberries grown at the 85 ha Costa berry site in northern Tasmania.
Photos credit: Jane Richter



A European honeybee providing a vital pollination service.
Photos credit: Jane Richter

“I don’t want to just come back with these grand ideas that don’t make economic sense. I am hoping to identify a few key areas we can improve our environmental sustainability in the berry industry and highlight the value proposition for all growers,” says Kirsty, again demonstrating a maturity of consideration in her approach.

After the scoping overview is completed, the first stage for Kirsty is to attend a meeting of the current Australian scholars in Canberra looking at the Australian context, followed by joining the Contemporary Scholars Conference where all the current scholars from around the world meet in Campo Grande in west central Brazil in March 2024. This forum is where she will be able to make a significant

network of contacts that can assist her to unlock access to the right people in the markets she is hoping to study; the mature markets of the USA and UK, Denmark where sustainability is already quite advanced, and finally the Netherlands to look at the intensive horticulture systems and how these coexist with considerations about biodiversity and the wider environment.

Kirsty will be required to make a presentation in September 2025 about what she has learned as well as providing a substantial written report. We will be following her journey closely across the next two years so look out for regular updates in this journal, in our e-newsletter and on our Facebook and LinkedIn pages.

About Nuffield Scholarships

- Nuffield Australia is the country’s leading agricultural scholarship organisation
- It a unique program offering Australian primary producers a chance to travel and study
- There are over 500 Nuffield Scholars in Australia and almost 2,000 worldwide
- Scholars are committed and passionate leaders and at the leading edge of technology uptake
- Each year, a new group of scholars are selected and they continue to be involved and engaged with Nuffield for life
- Each scholarship is valued at \$35,000 and open to Australian citizens or permanent residents directly involved in food and fibre production typically aged between 28 and 45
- The bursary allows scholars to travel overseas both individually and in small groups
- After the study, scholars produce a written report and communicate the new knowledge and experience to others in the industry

Find out more at www.nuffield.com.au