

Strawberry runner production on display at JCLM Farming

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Fruit Growers Tasmania and Berries Australia held a strawberry runner field day earlier this year at JCLM Farming Pty Ltd, who operate an 80ha farm at Ouse in Tasmania's central highlands. Central to JCLM's operations is their commercial runner production nursery, which is situated near Tasmania's Derwent River.

Located in Tasmania's central highlands region, JCLM use their colder environment to produce high quality, high-chill strawberry runners for strawberry producers in Tasmania, Victoria, Western Australia, and Queensland.

Throughout the field day, business owner Jack Beattie provided growers and other industry members with a tour of the operation.

Varieties

During the tour, growers were invited to inspect the nursery and compare the many varieties being propagated at the site to support both summer and winter production. These varieties include short day and temperate strawberry varieties from the Australian Strawberry Breeding Program (ASBP), including 'Red Rhapsody-ASBP', 'Sundrench-ASBP', 'Tahli-ASBP' and 'Tamara-ASBP', as well as varieties from the University of California Davis (UCD) and University of Florida (UF)/EMCO CAL breeding programs.

The Australian Strawberry Breeding Program (ASBP) is funded by Hort Innovation using the Strawberry R&D levy and contributions from the Australian Government.

Growing high quality runners

Jack explained that the process starts with planting disease-free strawberry mother plants, who produce runners on long stolons throughout the spring and summer period. These runners are pegged down to encourage them to take root, which is made easier for the plants by the deep and free draining sandy loam soils of the farm.

In terms of pest and disease management, Jack explained that he prefers to utilise an Integrated Pest Management (IPM) approach, which allows him to monitor and sustainably control pests and disease at commercially acceptable levels whilst minimising unnecessary chemical use. Being isolated from other strawberry producing regions gives JCLM a degree of extra protection for both their mother plants and the harvested runners.

At the end of the growing period, the runners are mechanically lifted and harvested in a way that minimises root damage, before being transported to the packing shed for washing to remove all soil. Here again, the lighter sandy soils separate from the roots more easily than other soils, without leaving staining or other impacts. The washing water itself also helps to pre-cool the runners, as it is sourced directly from the Derwent River during the colder autumn and winter months.

Following the washing process, runners are loaded into plastic bins and placed in a vacuum chiller which rapidly reduces the remaining field temperature to around 4°C. The chilled runners are then brought into the packing shed to be separated, graded and packed into waxed cardboard boxes. The runners are stored in a cool room prior to being dispatched via refrigerated transport to the customer.

Cold critical to runner quality

After hearing Jack's explanation of the runner production process, I was fortunate to be able to catch up with Jack again in May, witnessing first-hand the care and dedication JCLM takes to ensure growers are getting the quality and quantity of runners they require.

Jack explains that the cooling process is critical to ensuring plant quality is maintained throughout the supply chain all the way to the future grower, as it

reduces plant tissue respiration, breakdown, and prevents partial composting and runner death during the potentially lengthy journeys to customers.

For this reason, Jack implements a QA program throughout the production and supply process, with random quality checks regularly made to ensure correct quality and quantity.



Participants at the field day



Washing strawberry runners



The Quality Control process in action at JCLM Farming



Jack Beattie with strawberry runners ready for dispatch

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