

# Grower profile: Burlington Berries, Cressy, Tasmania

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Recently I got to speak with Laurie Adams, General Manager from Burlington Berries to see how the business originally started out, and what they are doing now that would be of interest to the rest of the berry growing community.

Laurie is originally from New Zealand. He moved to Tasmania after living and working in the UK berry industry for the last 20 years, with companies such as Haygrove. Laurie and his family relocated to Tasmania 18 months ago to take up the opportunity with Burlington Berries. The industry in Australia and ideal climate in Tasmania combine to make it an exciting place to grow berries and to develop the business.

Burlington Berries is located in Cressy, south of Launceston in Tasmania and is the result of a joint venture in 2012, between Kate and Stewart Sutherland with their business Upper Murray Seeds, and Jon and Marion Regan from Hugh Lowe farms, a long-standing berry grower in the UK with over 100 years of growing experience. The farm was originally located on 15 hectares in 2012, increasing over the years to their current size of 48 hectares, with plans for expansion to include another 12 hectares over the next two years. Burlington Berries now grows mainly raspberries and strawberries with some blackberries, all of which are supplied through the Driscoll's group. In the fast-growing berry sector, Laurie sees the success of the business as relying on attracting and retaining good people and innovating to manage the crop, improve productivity and reduce waste.

## Innovation

Since starting the farm, Burlington Berries has invested heavily in improving their infrastructure. Not only do they have their own pack house on site to monitor quality and provide a diversity of jobs, but they have also moved to protected cropping and the use of coir substrate to grow their crops.

By 2018 all of their crops had transitioned to be grown in poly tunnels and coir substrate. This enables them to extend their season and have better control of the growing climate and plant health.

Climate control and canopy control has been fundamental in managing fungal disease at Burlington Berries. The team are always looking at ways to lower the rate of disease incursion, with plans to trial new Haygrove hoop designs on poly tunnels in the near future. These will reduce temperature and humidity fluctuations and improve air volume around the crop, creating a better growing environment and decreasing labour and chemical requirements. In Laurie's view, integrated pest management (IPM) is integral to lowering chemical use and reducing cost.



**The future is all about integrated farming, and that means managing climate and the plant before reaching for chemicals. We've had a lot of success this year managing powdery mildew through managing these factors rather than using chemicals.**



**Raspberry Harvesting.** Photo credit: Burlington Berries



**A SWP worker picking strawberries.** Photo credit: Burlington Berries



**Inspecting Blackberry quality.** Photo credit: Burlington Berries

Burlington Berries is always looking to improve production efficiencies through in-house research. Projects underway include developing their capability to produce their own long cane raspberry and blackberries.

If successful, this means advancement in manipulating the Rubus season which will support the management of the labour curve. They are also financing a new facility dedicated to running a range of scientific trials on plant physiology and crop management.

Burlington Berries has also partnered with a UK robotics company called 'Dogtooth' (dogtooth.tech). Dogtooth have developed Artificial intelligence (AI) technology for picking soft fruit such as strawberries. Burlington Berries' role in the project has been in assisting with data collection during strawberry harvest to inform the AI database.

In the late stages of development, the technology is 3-5 years from being used on farm, where it will reduce the labour component for harvest and deliver consistent quality at picking. Laurie is enthusiastic about the project and the future of technology in farming.

*"Data and digital farming are exciting, it's exciting seeing all the technology and new improvements being developed."*

## People

On the topic of labour, Laurie has a lot to say. He believes the *"success of the business relies on the quality of the people you have. People, whether they are seasonal workers or have a more permanent role, are fundamental to the success of the business"*.

The COVID-19 pandemic has seen international border closures impact on the ability of berry producers to sustain the portion of their workforce which is normally comprised of overseas workers.

Burlington Berries have been involved in the Seasonal Workers Program (SWP) either through agencies or directly for the last 7 years, hiring employees from East Timor and Tonga to provide up to two-thirds of their workforce with locals making up the remaining one-third.

Laurie has enjoyed seeing this partnership grow. Being involved in the SWP to bring workers from East Timor and Tonga has been rewarding for the workers and producers alike, but has not been without complication, in particular the pandemic associated border closures.

On the issue of the border closures and access to their workforce, Laurie praised the work of local representatives and the industry who have helped them to have a successful harvest. He described the Tasmanian State Government, the local Driscoll's growers group and Fruit Growers Tasmania as being extremely helpful and responsive to the needs of the berry industry in Tasmania. Helping growers to bring seasonal workers to Tasmania, co-ordinate production schedules, and providing representation for berry producers.

## Environment and sustainability

For the management team at Burlington Berries there is a focus on meeting environmental and sustainability objectives. They have started a number of initiatives within their own business to reduce waste and promote more sustainable practices. These activities are informed by daily analysis of field and fruit waste which helps to drive operational and technical improvements for the business.

To minimise waste Burlington Berries re-use or recycle all of their coir. Coir from strawberry blocks, raspberry and blackberry pots is collected and composted or solarised with farm waste to remove pest and disease, then added to arable field crops as a soil conditioner. They are also looking to grow in recycled coir with a number of research trials being implemented on-farm.

Composted coir has been combined with new coir for an in-house crop trial at Burlington. In the first year of this trial there was no yield loss for raspberries when compared with growing in 100% new coir. In a separate trial, early results have also indicated keeping strawberries in the same coir for 2 years, rotating the strawberry varieties for the second year of planting as being equally productive. These trials are ongoing.

Water recycling and reuse is another area being improved by the addition of water treatments and harvesting. Currently some water run-off from tunnels is reused on adjacent arable crops, with UV and hydrogen peroxide treatments used to disinfect water from local water catchments inhibiting this pathway of pathogens to the crop.

## The future

*"Berries are labour intensive, people intensive and creativity intensive crops. To be successful we need to be constantly challenging and re-assessing the way we do things"* says Laurie Adams.