Grower profile: Parvinder Lalli — Paving the way for the berry industry in Corindi, NSW

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Parvinder Lalli, is a blueberry, blackberry and raspberry grower situated at Corindi in Northern NSW. At present Parvinder has 6 acres of blueberries, 5 acres of blackberries and 2 acres of raspberries.

Figure 1. Parvinder Lalli. Photo credit: Melinda Simpson

From bananas to blueberries

Like many of the early blueberry growers located in the Coffs Harbour area, Parvinder was originally a banana grower in Woolgoolga who gave blueberries a try around the mid-2000s when banana prices started to fall due to saturation of the market. Unfortunately, when they upgraded the Pacific Highway and by-passed Woolgoolga, the bypass went through his property and left an unviable amount of land for horticulture production. Subsequently, Parvinder purchased a property in Corindi with 5 acres of macadamias on it in 2010. He decided to pull out the macadamias and re-planted with 6 acres of blueberries which he profited well from.

Turn right for Rubus

In around 2014-15 when OzGroup growers were given access to Driscoll's raspberry varieties, Parv was keen to give them a try and was one of the first OzGroup growers to grow raspberries.

At this time, both his blueberries and raspberries were doing well and in 2017 he decided to expand and put more raspberries in at the Corindi farm. Instead of packing in-field and with buckets as many raspberry growers do, Parv has created his own system for pickers which includes a packing tray with a harness attached (Figure 3), in which they transfer to a shed to pack into punnets (Figure 4). This system is on par with other systems for efficiencies, but the quality seems to be better and the environment for the pickers is much more pleasant" Parvinder said.

Blackberries – the next corner

With his blueberries and raspberries doing well and talk of OzGroup growers getting access to Driscoll's blackberry varieties, Parvinder travelled to the United States to the Driscoll's Headquarters to learn and see how blackberries were grown in the United States.

In 2018 he was one of the first OzGroup growers to put in blackberries. Parvinder wasn't sure how they were going to go but managed to get a massive floricane crop and needed to bring in 50-70 workers to get it all picked.

Figure 2. Raspberry block
Figure 3. Picking system with harness
Figure 4. Packing from trays into punnets
Figure 5. Roof partially open
Figure 6. Roof fully open
Figure 7. Roof and sides can both be adjusted and are controlled electronically
Figure 8. Drain tray

Photo credit: Melinda Simpson

Within a year Parv had learnt a lot about blackberries and wanted to expand in this crop and decided to pull out some blueberries to do so.

"I wanted a more consistent environmental structure to grow my blackberries under and was looking at the Cravo retractable system but wasn't sure if financially it was the right move" Parvinder said. (Figure 5 & 6)

After much consideration and contemplation Parv decided to install a 12,000m^2 Cravo retractable roof greenhouse in early 2020. It took 3 months to build the structure, but all up the process took around 8 to 9 months to complete and he planted blackberries into the greenhouse in September 2020. There are weather stations both inside and outside the greenhouse and at the click of a button the roof can open or close, partially (Figure 5) or fully (Figure 6) to maintain a stable internal environment.

This system allows the plants to be protected from environmental extremes such as excessive or insufficient cold, heat, rain, or wind, and by preventing disorders associated with insufficient transpiration and the resultant lack of water stress typical in conventional greenhouse environments. The ability to let a controlled amount of rain into the greenhouse also means that the grass in the inter-row can be maintained which in turn has helped to reduce mite flares in his blackberries.

Opening and closing the roof is computer controlled and can be controlled off site from a phone or tablet. The roof takes a short amount of time to completely open or close, so the roof can be closed quickly if bad weather is forecast. The walls of the greenhouse can also be raised and lowered automatically when required (Figure 7).

The workers also prefer working in the new Cravo greenhouse. It is warmer in winter and in summer it is cooler inside as the roof material blocks the heat and UV rays.

Although this system can be run automatically, for the first nine months Parvinder has been running the system manually. He feels that by running it this way he has learnt a lot about the system and how to achieve the most out of it and now feels confident that he can switch it over to automatic control.

His blackberries are only nine months old and so he hasn't got a complete yield out of them so time will tell the advantage on yield using this system.

> **"I have seen a real advantage in pollination using this system, I have noticed that the bees can get out freely to go back to their hives and are foraging throughout the blackberries consistently. This has resulted in more uniform pollination the whole way through the greenhouse.**

However, he is already noticing other benefits of this system such as better fruit size and a better shine on the fruit. Parvinder also harvests the rainwater collected from his greenhouse roof and stores it in a large tank to use for irrigation. For every 1 mm of rain the farm receives he collects 12,000 L in storage.

Parvinder has also invested in two Priva GroScale weighing scales combined with drain sensors that connect with the Priva Moisture Balance Module. The weighing scale combined with the drain sensor analyses the moisture levels of the substrate and this data is used by the Moisture Balance Module to control fertigation dosing and timing. The module determines the optimal irrigation start strategy, based on three important influences: the quantity of water evaporated, the desired amount of drain water and the water content of the substrate. (Figure 8)

"These Priva GroScales take the manual labour out of irrigation scheduling, you can walk away for three days and know what is happening with your irrigation through your phone. It has also improved our irrigation efficiencies, and this has resulted in a more consistent crop."

Instead of purchasing more land to expand his production, Parvinder has made the choice to invest in his Corindi farm to be more efficient and consistent, getting better yields and quality rather than volume from a larger scale. It is great to see that Parvinder's son has recently come onboard to help run the farm and I look forward to seeing how the journey continues for them both into the future.

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