

Profile: Driaan Conradie, Perfection Fresh

Mark Salter, Berry Industry Development Officer, Fruit Growers Tasmania

Driaan was born in South Africa where his interest in farming began. After school, he attended Cape Peninsula University of Technology and studied Agricultural Management. After finishing his studies, he worked in various agricultural sectors, including vineyards, olives, pome fruit and stone fruit, ending up in different areas of citrus production for 8 years.

Both Driaan and his wife then began looking for opportunities in Australia and applied for the skilled visa necessary to move to Australia. Driaan and his wife received state sponsorship from Tasmania as skilled workers and shortly after, he applied for a position with Perfection Fresh in Tasmania starting with the company in March 2020. He gradually worked his way through the ranks and is now Farm Manager at Perfection Fresh's 46ha berry farm at Riana in Northern Tasmania.

Production

The Perfection Fresh site at Riana was established in 2018 to grow blueberries, raspberries and strawberries in tunnels utilising a hydroponic growing system. Blueberries are the largest berry volume at this site. The blueberry varieties are all Perfection Fresh selections with the aim of having a wide harvest window. The plants are all grown in coir substrate.

Perfection also grows raspberries which are high yielding, large and sweet fruit. Perfection Fresh continually runs trials to optimise the fruit offer both from a growing perspective and to match consumer preferences. The raspberries are also grown in coir substrate.

The company also grows strawberry varieties on the farm; these are chosen because of their high brix, solid sweet fruit and high yields. The strawberries are grown on tabletops in coir substrate bags.

Irrigation is managed by a Priva control system with all plants being fed a fertigation mix depending on berry type and production cycle. Perfection Fresh has an on-farm water storage capacity, stored in spring fed dams. The company also has access to the local irrigation scheme if needed.

Labour

Perfection Fresh utilise seasonal workers through approved supplier programs, with local labour and backpackers making up the balance. Driaan commented that the biggest challenge this season has been ensuring continuity of labour due to the impact COVID-19. This was especially difficult during the January period when COVID-19 was at its peak in Tasmania and harvest was also in full swing.

Marketing

Perfection Fresh market their premium fruit under the "Perfection" brand, with fruit being sold across the country through independent retailers and supermarkets. The company also supply a 'superior' offering during the Tasmanian harvest for select niche customers.



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Figure 1 & 2. Riana farm site seen from the air showing some of the 46ha of tunnels. Photo credit: Perfection Fresh

Figure 3. Driaan Conradie in one of the raspberry tunnels. Photo credit: Mark Salter, FGT

Figure 4. Blueberry bushes grown in coir pots in tunnels. Photo credit: Mark Salter, FGT

Challenges and the future

Whilst there are always challenges in fruit and vegetable production due to nature of the industry, this year brought the added burden of COVID-19 plus the increasing costs of production inputs like packaging, coir, fertiliser, and wages.

One of the other major challenges this year has been the weather and in particular the low light intensity, with some of the lowest light levels on record. This translated into a slower start to the season and an earlier finish to the season for some varieties.

Future

Driaan says the company is looking to continue growth through expanding production and bringing superior varieties to the market.

Perfection Fresh will continue its model of securing the best proprietary varieties to satisfy consumer needs and leverage its national scale. Marketing and branding will play a key role in ensuring consumers can find the best berries shopping across the berry patch and drive repeat purchase.