

Profile:

Tony O'Connell

Something from the Ground Blueberries

Grove, TAS



Blueberry grower Tony O'Connell reflects on his lessons learned during the establishment of the family farm and adopting organic and biological growing principles.

When I reflect on the progress of the farm, I think of the benefits of connecting with the Tasmanian fruit growing community. It is important to share new ideas, the mistakes we have made and what we have learned from them. I would say asking advice of those who have been in the industry for a long time has been beneficial.

My background has always been in agriculture, growing up on a cattle and sheep station in the snowy mountain region in southern New South Wales and then in Northern Tasmania with cropping, beef cattle and blueberries. I have always had an interest in horticulture and returned to the land after pursuing a meteorological career.

My wife, three children and I have been growing a six-hectare organic and biological grown blueberry orchard here in the Huon Valley for eight years now. It's a family-run business with the orchard being planted over a four-year period from 2010. The land was originally an old apple orchard, changing to horses and hay production over the following decades.

We decided to take an organic and biological direction for the farm in 2013 and were pleased with the retailer support and consumer demand for using these production methods. We aim to maintain soil health whilst harnessing soil productivity using microbes to develop a highly productive soil-food web. This is where the name '*Something from the Ground*' represents where it all starts!

We mainly grow northern highbush varieties of Brigitta for fresh market produce, Bluerose for our frozen and pick-your-own, and Southern Highbush Legacy for fresh market and lower chill needs.



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Experience has taught us to grow new plants in our nursery before planting out. This not only aids in our control of any biosecurity issues, but also acclimates our nursery stock before planting out with almost no loss!

With my interest and background in meteorology, we have made some very important capital investments to mitigate the risk to our crop of climatic conditions. Improving the efficiency of our irrigation management has been achieved through installing moisture and temperature sensors and on-farm weather station monitoring. Even with the Grove Bureau of Meteorology weather station just 1km away, we see variation between the farm location and the reported data.

Over time, we have noticed that any issues with yields or fruit quality here in our upper-Huon Valley location stem from its characteristic microclimate: From the start of our season in January to the end of our season in April it ranges from high 30's-40°C temperatures, low (12%) humidity and late frosts.

The Antarctic Climate and Ecosystem report for Tasmania is showing more extreme unseasonal variations in temperature. Combined with the tendency for frost in our area, we needed to look at technology to buffer for extremes in climate.

After much research and talking to people in the frost protection field, we have installed sprinklers to protect from both frost and heat extremes. While there are two types of frost development, one being radiation and the other advection (which isn't very common), this method protects from both. The sprinklers form an ice cover, to insulate the flowers and fruit to protect from frost damage. At harvest, we know that extreme heat can cause softening fruit and sunburn. Our overhead sprinklers have mitigated against this through our picking period and flower bud initiation at the end of summer.

Blueberries are attracting new consumers with their 'rockstar-superfood' status with consumption rates rising. I think this emphasises more critically that we need to make sure that we, as growers, produce a premium and exceptional product in this industry for consumers all the time! I want consumers to have a positive eating experience knowing they are nourishing themselves and their family, and to keep coming back for more again and again.

It's hard to believe pruning is just around the corner!