

# Profile: The Crolla Family – A chance meeting changes the whole family's lives

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The Crolla family are English-Italian immigrants who migrated to Australia after World War Two and settled in Adelaide, South Australia. Having worked for 3 generations in the building and construction industry, in 2015 the whole family decided to have a change; a total tree change as it turned out.

Robert Crolla has the fairly unusual claim of being one third of the first identical triplets born in Australia for over one hundred years. It was such a rare occurrence that the Adelaide Advertiser revisited the family every few years to take photos of the growing boys. Starting his career as a chef, Robert chopped his way through his days until a casual job helping a friend's father with some tiling gave him his first career right turn into construction.

Fast forward to age 60 and Robert went to visit some family and friends in Sydney then Coffs Harbour during the 2014/15 Christmas period. After a chance meeting at a New Years' Eve party with a couple of berry growers, who just so happen to be neighbours of the family friends, Robert became inspired to take his second right turn and become a blueberry farmer.

When Robert and his wife Deidre returned to Adelaide, they both had fallen in love with the idea of becoming blueberry famers on the Coffs coast and could not stop talking about it. Sons Aaron and Dane thought they were just plain crazy at the time. But after weeks of talking about a subtropical climate change for lifestyle, Robert convinced the two boys to go and check it out for themselves.

In February 2015, just six weeks after Robert had visited Coffs Harbour, he returned with his two sons. They both found the experience refreshingly different from anything they had seen or done before. Within just two days of being in Coffs Harbour the boys were sold on the idea and agreed to a 10-year lease on some land adjacent to an existing berry farm... and as they say, the rest is history.

After an enormous amount of hard work installing infrastructure, the farm is five years on and they now have around 7,000 plants. They grow several blueberry varieties including Splash, Dazzle, Snowchaser, R11-11, OB1 and Rabbiteye's. The farm set up is much like other farms in the Coffs Harbour area including an irrigated fertigation system, in-ground plants with weed matted mounds and black netting.

The family are members of the OzGroup Co-Op and all of their fruit goes to the central sorting and packing facility in Coffs Harbour. Being a member of a bigger organisation like OzGroup has given them access to expert help with everything from farm set-up to nutrition and pest and disease advice.



Honey bee pollinating blueberry flower. Photo credit: Jane Richter



Blueberry bush laden with berries. Photo credit: Jane Richter



Crolla family farm. Photo credit: Jane Richter



L-R: Dane, Robert and Aaron Crolla. Photo credit: Magnum & Co

### What have been the main challenges you've experienced growing blueberries in NSW and how have you resolved these?

Having no farming experience at the beginning of the journey has definitely been the most challenging thing for us. It has been baby steps all the way and we feel like it was one step forward and two steps back in the early days. We now have a good understanding of blueberry farming and are very confident of what we are doing and are definitely achieving our goals.

Each year we have different challenges, as farming is very much affected by unknown circumstances such as extreme weather events and natural disasters (e.g. floods, drought and bush fire). For us and a lot of other farms, looking for good workers also hasn't been easy.



**What we have learnt is building good relationships with people and businesses is very important, being honest and genuine is the key.**

### If you could choose, where would you like to invest money into blueberry research and development?

Better development in all areas. One area in particular would be genetics, so new strains of varieties are stronger at resisting pest and disease problems. We'd like to see less chemicals applied throughout the life of the plant. More research into organic farming would also be nice, so the industry has the knowledge of what practices are the best and safest and so we don't have any problems down the track like we are seeing now with Glyphosate or DDT in the past.

### What do you like best about being a blueberry grower?

Every day is different and challenging, you will never run out of work to do on the farm. The best thing must be the satisfaction and sense of achievement when you see the blueberry plants loaded with flowers and fruits. The other thing we love is to meet workers from all around the world. We always sit down to have our lunch break with them and have a chat. One day we are learning French, next day Chinese and Japanese the day after. Blueberry farms are a good melting pot of cultures.



Department of Primary Industries