

Klaas Plas: the Dutchman down under

Claire McCrory, Berry Industry Development Officer, Fruit Growers Tasmania

Back in pre-COVID March, Fruit Growers Tasmania (FGT) held the first instalment in a series of Berry Information Days, in Launceston. To launch the series, Dutch strawberry expert Klaas Plas was invited to come to Australia to share his 30+ years of strawberry knowledge with Tasmanian growers.

His experience ranges from working at the Dutch Ministry of Agriculture, Delphy Netherlands to working in agricultural aid in Hungary and Ukraine, before starting his own company, BerryKonsult. Supporting Klaas and providing up-to-date Australian information was Michael Gangi, National Lead Berry Agronomist from E.E. Muir and Sons, based in Victoria.

Throughout the day Klaas shared insights on spotted wing drosophila (SWD) and the lessons learned from its invasion of Europe. He also shared insights on how to adopt and maximise benefits from integrated pest management (IPM) and the importance of the vegetative-generative balance between fruit, leafy vegetative growth, and other reproductive growth.

Michael complemented this with updates and learnings from other Australian states, including advances in Australian berry production, detailing propagation, tunnel systems and substrates. He gave an update on Australian varieties and management tools available for field and substrate systems. He also addressed the management of botrytis, powdery mildew and two spotted mite; the main disease burdens in south-eastern Australia.

The event was well attended, with more than 50 people taking part including commercial producers, agronomists, horticulture students and home growers.

Sharing new information and skills

Klaas presented a short follow-up series of live-streamed guest lectures to horticulture students and staff at the Tasmanian Institute of Agriculture. Commercial growers from across Australia were also able to take part in the lecture series, joining online through a live-stream hosted by the University of Tasmania.

The recorded version can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KhxHOXjslps>

Klaas' lecture topics covered Integrated Pest and Disease Management (IPDM) and flower mapping techniques for predicting and managing strawberry vegetative-generative balance. Flower mapping involves dissecting a strawberry plant and examining with a microscope to determine how many flower trusses each crown will produce. This information is used by strawberry growers in Europe to forecast the size and volume of fruit.

This lecture series provided an excellent opportunity for growers, researchers and horticultural students to ask questions and learn about some of latest industry practices being adopted in Europe.

At the conclusion of the lectures, Klaas lead final-year students through a practical session on strawberry runner anatomy and flower mapping. This was a great opportunity for students to practically learn a unique set of new skills that are not commonly practiced in Australian strawberry production.

Climate right for IPDM, organics

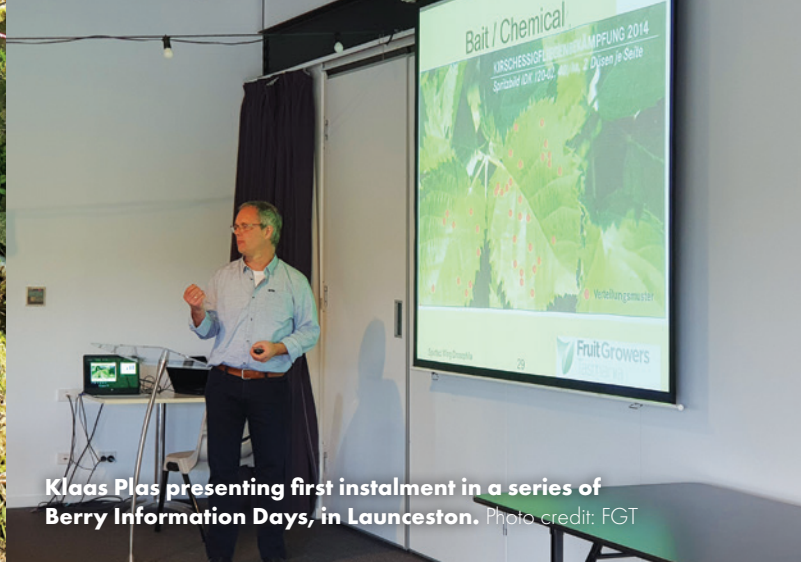
Klaas visited growers around the state for private on-farm consulting sessions, meeting with them to discuss their challenges and provide a different perspective on farm management. During these visits, Klaas was amazed at how perfect the temperate climate was for growing strawberries, particularly the moderate coastal areas.



Klaas Plas with his magnifying lens observing raspberry leaves at Hillwood Berries. Photo credit: FGT



Klaas Plas consulting with Roly McKinnon from Mountford Berries. Photo credit: FGT



Klaas Plas presenting first instalment in a series of Berry Information Days, in Launceston. Photo credit: FGT



Michele Buntain from the Tasmanian Institute of Agriculture assisting a flower mapping tutorial by Klaas Plas attended by 4th year students Jessica Bell, Anna Mackintosh and Nik Saunders. Photo credit: FGT



These regions have higher humidity, lower summer temperatures and higher winter temperatures as their air temperature is affected by the nearby coastal water which warms up and cools down more slowly, buffering climate extremes.

In these areas, Klaas firmly believes it should be possible for interested growers to develop successful systems for control of pests or diseases with little-to-no agrichemical use in commercial strawberry production. The relative pest freedom made the region perfect for exploring IPDM and organic production systems that rely on populations of beneficial predatory insect species.

With such a strong domestic population of beneficial predators to manage pest species, it becomes easier to grow strawberries without insecticides. Given the rising trend of zero/low residue limits in European strawberries, he sees a great opportunity for Tasmania to enter this market.

Klaas also identified strong populations of mites, *feltiella*-like spp. (predatory gall midge), and *aphidius*-like spp. (*aphid parasitoids*), predatory thrips, lacewings and damsel bugs residing in the long grass near wild blackberry species.

Berry growers can harness these and other beneficial species to manage insect pests by supporting these species in the growing environment, providing them with refuges of long grass and/or legumes beneath strawberry production tables and establishing flowers and bushy vegetation close to production areas. By encouraging this mixed-species environment, Klaas notes that berry growers can expect beneficial species to flourish in the Tasmanian climate, keeping insect pest species under control and reducing grower's reliance and expenditure on agrichemicals.

Looking to the future

Joining Klaas on his consult visits offered an invaluable opportunity to meet growers, understand their growing systems and be part of forming strategies to improve production. Given how much Klaas enjoyed the people, culture, climate and country, we hope to see him back in Tasmania again in the near future and will touch base with him regularly for online tutorials and webinars as the European strawberry season unfolds.

Until then, we look forward to following the progress of the growers he visited and watching how their systems continue to progress and evolve.



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