

Profile: Anthony Yewers, Berry Sweet



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Anthony Yewers grows strawberries as well as other berries at multiple sites in WA. His parents were strawberry growers and initially, after finishing school, Anthony had no interest in continuing the farm. During his gap year his mother fell ill and Anthony returned to the family farm to help out. He has now finished his 36th planting season.

We established Berry Sweet in the early 1990s in Bullsbrook, WA with the purpose of supplying the local market in Western Australia with Strawberries. We now supply all of Australia's major supermarkets and grow for the Driscolls brand as well.

We have diversified into growing other berries including raspberries, blackberries and blueberries. We have a farm store and café where the public can visit.

You can see more about the farm at
www.berrysweet.com.au

Describe your production systems

We started off growing strawberries in the ground but have since converted the majority of our production at Muchea and Bullsbrook to tabletop in substrate production with all of our farm at Pemberton converted to tabletops (See Figure 1).

By next year, all production will be tabletop substrate production. We chose to convert after seeing firsthand the benefits of this system overseas.

The benefits include better quality, less weather impacts, greater efficiency and happier workers. All crops are grown under tunnels as well. This has enabled us to have control of when the plants are exposed to the weather.



Figure 1: Substrate production in tunnels at one of the farm sites

Is there a focus on something particular?

We focus on meeting market demand, with the philosophy that every berry grown has a consumer. Our goal of maintaining our reputation for reliability, high quality standards, communication and integrity has given us the ability to diversify into other berry crops with support from our business partners.

We are currently focusing on growing our blueberry production where we are looking to trial some of the new blueberry varieties that are being developed. Our goal is to be able to supply berries all year round. We are constantly looking at other areas of the business that require further investment including the farms, new technology (robotics), production and packing facilities, production protocols and our staff.

Where do you source your water from?

All of our sources contain high quality water; we have access to creeks on the properties or dams (southern properties) and a backup bore. When we expanded we ensured that the property had access to high quality water. Water quality is important in ensuring that we produce the highest quality fruit that we can.

Where do you source your labour from?

We rely on the Seasonal Worker Program (SEE PAGE 22) to fulfil our labour requirements across the farms as there is often not enough local, reliable labour to meet seasonal demand. The program has enabled us to have a supply of reliable workers of whom the majority return each season. We rely on employment agencies to organise and manage the work crews and all their requirements including their pastoral care while in Australia. Their welfare is paramount to the success of our business. It has led to increased productivity, less wastage and better quality control. We have four or five local workers that mainly oversee the maintenance of the farms.

What's new in your business? How is your business unique?

We are always trying to think ahead in this game - the minute you are standing still you are going backwards. We are always trying to identify where we can make changes, something many do not think to do. We strive to be leaders in the industry in every facet of the industry. Feedback from our auditors says we keep the best business, staff and OH&S records in horticulture. We have an 'open book' policy with our staff where they can access their records any time. This includes what they picked, their picking rate, hours of work and hourly work rate. In some other workplaces they do not see any records until payday. We rely on piece work as the payment method, with the idea that hard work is rewarded. We are currently experimenting with robotics as a tool in our integrated pest management program. Where possible we are always looking for areas where we can use technology as an aid.

What is your favourite part of growing berries?

My favourite part of the season is during the planting and when the plants start to flower. I enjoy watching the plants thrive and produce fruit. But once picking starts, I tend to lose interest. I can be slightly obsessive watching the plants during establishment. This all feeds into my desire to trial new varieties and see how they go.

What challenges are you seeing in the industry?

The key challenges, like most agricultural sectors, is there are not enough young people wanting to take up farming. The limited knowledge of hydroponics for growing berries is a key issue. Many take on the technology but fail in the process due to the challenges in converting and maintaining plant health. There needs to be more recognition of the importance of horticultural education and training by employers and it should be reflected in pay rates. We, as an industry, need to be the drivers in this because at the end of the day it benefits everyone. This is important in the case of substrate farming. A lot can go wrong quickly and there is a greater financial risk involved as opposed to field growing.

Advice for those seeking to begin growing berries?

Gain as much hands-on experience as you can with a leading strawberry producer for at least 12 months. Learn as much as you can across all facets of the business. Ask as many questions as possible. Try to be the best in the industry, always look to learn and apply new technology. Understand what is needed to meet HARPS and FreshCare obligations and try to stay ahead of those requirements as demand certification and testing increases.

What are you looking forward to in the future?

Industry wise

- The application of technology in farming practices such as the use of robots for disease management and harvesting.
- The development of new varieties across all berry sectors that suit our growing conditions.
- New or novel packaging focusing on quality control and minimising our environmental footprint.
- Industry trends in research, its application in farms overseas and what may be applicable here.
- The development of new production systems that can be used to grow all berry crops whilst minimising labour costs.

The family business perspective

- Eventually I would like my children to take over the business. They will first have to gain experience outside of the family business, I would like that to be overseas. The experience will allow them to bring new ideas back and adopt them here when the time comes.

What areas would you like to see R&D focus on?

- There needs to be a focus on implementing fruit quality standards.
- A focus on MRL testing and the implementation and enforcement of standards where there are breaches, ensuring industry are aware of their obligations.
- New approaches in managing pest and diseases that are more sustainable.
- The development of new varieties across all berry categories, suited to our growing conditions without compromising fruit quality.
- A focus on educating the younger generation so they are aware of the development of new growing practices.
- Addressing language barriers in industry given the high number of language other than English (LOTE) growers. This would benefit the whole industry and aid knowledge transfer.
- More minor use permits registered for different chemicals so we have more options available to control pests and diseases.
- Greater understanding of the intricacies of fertiliser application and the substrate production system for the determining best practice.