

Hillwood Berries: Expanding berry production to the tropics

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Hillwood
BERRIES | QUEENSLAND



Hillwood Berries are an icon of the Tasmanian berry industry. Their involvement in berry production started 1985 when Robin Dornauf planted the first raspberry canes at the Christmas Hills Raspberry Farm, in northern Tasmania. Simon joined his father in 2010 to develop the land surrounding their dairy factory into a new and innovative berry farm about an hour away at Hillwood. On returning from his studies in the USA a few years later, Robin's second son Marcus joined the family venture and helped grow the business to its current 52 ha size.

Today, Hillwood Berries is a hugely successful enterprise with around 27 ha of tabletop strawberries, 16 ha of raspberries, 7 ha of blackberries and 2 ha of blueberries. Add to this the very popular pick-your-own tourism venture and farmgate cafe, coupled with managing a team of around 55 permanent staff and approximately 500 seasonal workers during peak production periods, you'd think the family would have their hands full already! But the Dornaufs are always thinking ahead and their latest expansion has now taken Hillwood Berries nearly 2000 km north to the agricultural hub of Bundaberg in Queensland.

Hillwood Berries are approved employers under the Seasonal Workers program (SWP) and the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility scheme (PALM), with their workers coming from Timor Leste, Tonga and Samoa. To gain maximum benefit from the 9-month visas applicable under the program, Hillwood initially collaborated with several growers in Queensland, sending workers north to work the winter strawberry season as production eased off in Tasmania. Through working with Queensland growers, the team gained valuable insight into the opportunities for berry production in the Sunshine state and the potential to supply berries year-round utilising their own seasonal workforce.

In 2021, the decision was made to expand into Bundaberg. An old eggplant farm in Avondale with a small number of existing hothouses' was snapped up, as the team jumped at the chance to acquire the ideal location to establish themselves in the region. Avondale is at an altitude of just 20m and just 10 km from the Pacific Ocean with a humid subtropical climate featuring hot, wet summers and mild, dry winters which are virtually frost-free.

Strawberries are the predominant berry grown in the Bundaberg region where the conditions are ideally suited to winter strawberry production, but the Dornaufs could see a gap in production and the potential for raspberries and blackberries grown in a protected cropping environment.

By quickly filling the existing tunnels with canes, the first Hillwood Berries Bundaberg crop of 1.4 hectares of blackberries and raspberries was harvested between May and October 2021, and the scene was set for major development of the site.

Marcus has taken on management of the farm and oversight of the expansion project, moving his family to the idyllic beachside location of Bargara just outside Bundaberg, and to a climate far removed from the Tassie cold.

Development underway

By early 2022, planning and building was underway with the goal of establishing 20 ha of tunnels for Rubus, strawberry and blueberry production. Six hectares of new tunnels were built for the 2022 season, adding to the existing tunnels already in place, with the remainder planned to be up and running for the 2023 season.

This year will see production of 8 ha of blackberries, 10 ha of raspberries and 1 ha each of strawberries and blueberries, all grown in substrate systems and predominantly Driscoll's varieties. The team will continue to work with Driscoll's on identifying genetics appropriate for the region and implementing innovative farming practices to increase their capacity to provide year-round supply of berries.

Working closely with UK based tunnel experts Haygrove, Hillwood have invested in their new Advantage range of polytunnels, with 3 hectares of EZvent™ and 15 hectares of Total Vent automated polytunnel systems. EZvent is Haygrove's simplest option for strategic venting to control temperature and relative humidity for crop growth, improved yield and quality, and it is recommended for all berry types.



Haygrove Total Vent tunnel system under construction at Hillwood Berries new Queensland farm at Avondale near Bundaberg. Photo credit: Hillwood Berries

The EZvent-bend is the key feature, with the bend located 2m up the hoop and the termination point of venting. It can be operated manually or with an electric drive system, significantly reducing labour and offering a simple solution for quick return on investment.

The Total Vent system is uniquely designed to auto-vent to the apex of the tunnel for precise climate control and mechanised skinning. It also allows for wider bay widths comparable to those of a glasshouse, meaning potential higher planting density for greater yield. It is recommended for all berry types in warmer climates or snow risk regions.

As the Bundaberg project is a flagship for Haygrove's Advantage range in Australia, an Open Day is being planned for Wednesday 20 September at Hillwood Berries in Avondale, with an open invitation for growers to come and see firsthand the benefits of utilising the new range of polytunnels.

A new 2,000 square metre warehouse is also under construction, which will include approximately 800 square metres of cold storage space.

Getting to know the locals

A significant hurdle to overcome when moving into a new region was having big plans for expansion with zero contacts for skilled and reliable building contractors, tradies and suppliers. Early attempts at recruiting the help they needed for tasks such as land clearing and plumbing jobs either didn't end well or took an excessively long time to complete. But by putting in the effort to establish their presence in the region, they now have a reliable network of contacts who are playing a vital role in building the infrastructure for the farm.

The Bundaberg Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association (BFVG) has been an invaluable resource for Hillwood since coming to Bundaberg, providing information, resources and contacts that have helped immensely with their establishment in the region. The Hillwood team have also set up administration operations at the Agtech Hub, a brand-new facility created by the Bundaberg Shire Council for the purpose of advancing agricultural innovation and technology in the region.

The Centre allows for easy collaboration between stakeholders as well as providing excellent facilities for learning, development and networking.



Completed Total Vent tunnels almost ready for planting to commence. Photo credit: Hillwood Berries



The EZvent tunnels recently installed with mechanised venting with field scale simplicity.

Photo credit: Hillwood Berries

Labour challenges

The Bundaberg farm now has nine permanent farm staff, plus around 40 seasonal workers helping with the tunnel and infrastructure build, and an expected labour force of around 230 seasonal workers will be required for harvest.

Although Hillwood will be utilising their own seasonal workers from the Tasmanian operation, providing sufficient accommodation has been a significant challenge as options are limited in the region.

A house in Avondale has been purchased and approved for conversion to worker accommodation, together with one of the two farmhouses on site. Even so, ensuring sufficient accommodation of the correct standard will be an ongoing challenge for the team as production progresses this year and into the coming seasons.

SAVE THE DATE

Haygrove & Hillwood Berries Open Day

To view the new automated Advantage range of polytunnels from Haygrove in action, put this date in your diary

**Wednesday, 20 September 2023
Hillwood Berries, Avondale (Bundaberg)**

Further information will be provided shortly.



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