

Profile: Alyx Busoli, Smart Berries

Mark Salter, Berry Industry Development Officer, Fruit Growers Tasmania

Berry grower Alyx Busoli has shown a passion for berries from an early age. Growing up in the raspberry growing region of Coffs Harbour on the north coast of New South Wales, Alyx spent most of her school holidays picking raspberries. Later Alyx moved to Victoria where she continued doing seasonal work during her school holidays.

In 2016, Alyx joined the Smart Berries team in Tasmania taking up a 2IC role before quickly rising to the role of Farm Manager a year later. Reflecting on this progression, Alyx explains it's been a steep learning curve in a fast-paced and challenging industry, and notes she has been very well supported by her leaders and peers.



Alyx Busoli is the Farm Manager at the Forth site.

Photo credit: Smart Berries

Growing a smarter berry

Smart Berries established their berry production site at Forth in Tasmania's northwest coast in 2015. This site was selected for its maritime microclimate which is close to the coast providing a cool climate with four distinct seasons.

Starting out with 20 tunnels of raspberries, the site has grown significantly and now includes 24 ha of raspberries and 7 ha of blueberries. There are plans to expand this area further, with another 7 ha of blueberries being added this winter and more expansions in coming years.

Smart Berries grows four varieties of Plant Sciences Inc raspberries which help achieve an extended season, as well as four varieties of blueberries. All the berries are grown under tunnels in coir substrate, except for a small number of raspberry tunnels which are currently in-ground but will be transferred to substrate next year. The hydroponic irrigation system is computer controlled to feed the plants a precise nutrient mix for the different growth stages.

On-site dams provide ample water storage for the irrigation, and the company also has a water allocation from the Kindred irrigation scheme if more water is required.



Both Raspberries and Blueberries are grown at the farm across 31 ha with a further 7 ha being installed this winter. Photo credit: Smart Berries

Harvest labour

The harvest season at Smart Berries goes from November through to June, and they employ approximately 200 pickers throughout the season.

Alyx begins the planning process well ahead of harvest to ensure there is sufficient labour for the season and it is still challenging particularly for a labour-intensive berry business.

Smart Berries source the majority of their harvest labour through labour hire companies, with most pickers coming from the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme who have proven to be keen workers.

Marketing

Smart Berries have production sites across Australia and in New Zealand providing year-round supply for their customers.

The fruit is marketed under the 'Smart Berries' brand with most of the fruit from the Forth site sold domestically in Tasmania and mainland states, and only a small volume going into export markets.

At the Forth site the fruit is picked and packed in the field then transported to the cool room for chilling prior to being dispatched to various markets.

Alyx explains that Smart Berries are upgrading their packing and coolstore facility at Forth this year. The upgrade will also include the initialisation of a new packing line for blueberries to significantly streamline the blueberry harvest.

Challenges

Among the many challenges, Alyx cites rising production costs including wages, coir, packaging, fertiliser and freight. Evaluating the new varieties grown on the farm can also be particularly challenging, as most of the genetics come from overseas and it may take several years to get the most from each variety. Despite these challenges, Alyx enjoys working in the fast-paced berry industry.

