

Profile: Cheyne Clarke hits the mark with innovation and change

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Cheyne Clarke has over 20 years' experience growing blueberries and over that time has learnt a thing or two. One of the biggest lessons is the need to adapt through change and the benefits that come with always looking for improvements. Cheyne originally started working in blueberries at Blueberry Farms of Australia – Chiquita (now Costa) but in 2005 he decided to start his own blueberry venture.



Figure 1. Cheyne at his farm in Woolgoolga NSW

Photo credit: Melinda Simpson

When starting out varieties were limited so, similar to many of the other growers at the time, Cheyne started with the southern highbush varieties Sharpe blue, Misty and some Rabbiteye varieties.

Contrast that to now where Cheyne is a member of the thriving OzGroup Co-op and he has seen many benefits, including access to new varieties and the accompanying agronomic support.

Currently Cheyne has 3000 plants in total, growing Mountain Blue varieties Initio and Dazzle as well as a few Costa and Driscoll varieties like Snowchaser and C-009, all grown in substrate using 28L Garden City Plastics pots.

Cheyne started growing in-ground but in 2015 converted to growing in substrate. This was due to the replant issues he experienced. When planting back into the ground of the original blueberry site he struggled to get plants to grow despite trialling many strategies.

The replants were never able to achieve the yields of the first plantings. This story is common amongst many growers on the mid-north coast and is why we see many growers making this transition to substrate growing. During his time growing blueberries in substrate, Cheyne has made changes to the way he operates based on lessons learnt from his early experiences. One such early lesson was plant density; Cheyne has learnt to move his plantings further apart over time to account for the quick growth in substrate growing.

He has also played with different irrigation strategies and has taken advantage of the first round of the Clean Coastal Catchments incentives grant program to install two Priva drain tray sensor systems and moisture sensors that connect with his Priva Compass (Figure 3).



Figure 2. Cheyne's set up includes blueberries grown in 28L Garden City Plastics pots. Photo credit: Melinda Simpson



Figure 3. Priva drain tray sensor system & moisture sensors. Photo credit: Melinda Simpson



Figure 4. Erosion and run-off control through water being slowed as it passes through strategic placed rocks. Photo credit: Melinda Simpson

Cheyne has learnt a lot about hydroponics and growing in substrate since starting in 2015. Cheyne offers this advice for growers looking at moving into substrate:

- Source advice from experts, don't just look over the fence to see what your neighbours are doing.
- Learn the basics and invest time into doing this. Cheyne completed a course with Graeme Smith in greenhouse hydroponics at Western Sydney University which helped him to gain a greater understanding of hydroponics and how to get the best out of crops grown in this environment.
- Don't retrofit! Think about the design and how you want to expand and improve in the future at the beginning because it's a lot harder to retrofit to make things work down the track.
- Invest in technology, it helps in the long run.
- Growing in substrate is less forgiving than the soil. If something goes wrong your plants can die in 2-3 days, so regardless of how much technology or investment you make into these systems, you still need to be out in the field checking your plants on a very frequent basis.

Cheyne has also taken advantage of funding delivered through local Landcare projects and encourages growers to take advantage of these groups. He has completed a number of erosion control and drainage works so that water running out of greenhouses and tunnels does not cause erosion and allows substrate run-off to be channelled into a tank for re-use elsewhere.

Cheyne is always seeking new market opportunities and continues to trial new crops. Alongside his blueberries he is currently growing cucumbers, eggplants and cherry tomatoes. Cheyne is expanding his greenhouse vegetable growing area and at present is installing a higher-tech greenhouse. The Harford MaxiSpan Greenhouse he is investing in has a 4m gutter height with twin gull wing vents and twin skinned poly film.

Cheyne has shown that he can adapt to change well. His ability to take on new innovative ideas and systems and keenness to address some of the bigger issues relating to blueberries makes him a valuable grower for industry.