

Mark Salter visits Queensland

Berry Industry Development Officers: Wendy Morris (Queensland) & Mark Salter (Fruit Growers Tasmania)

With Rubus IDO, Mark Salter, approaching retirement it was time for him to make one last tour of Queensland raspberry farms. This article gives an overview of Mark's visit cramming in seven farms, two regions and two dinners in just three short days.

Joining Queensland Berry Industry Development Officer Wendy Morris, the tour started at the Wamuran site of Piñata Farms where outgoing farm manager Liam Riedy was busy with strawberry planting. Piñata currently grow strawberries across a mix of in-ground and tabletop production areas, and like many growers in the region this year planting was delayed due to extended periods of wet weather. Piñata also grow Rubus in Wamuran, and to extend the season of their crop Pinata implement various techniques including staggered planting and pruning timing. This ensures the crop is spread throughout the season which also helps with managing harvest labour.

The next stop was to visit Angelo Pinna from Athea who grows a couple of hectares of 'Kwanza' raspberries under tunnels. This Perfection Fresh variety was selected because it produces large volumes of excellent eating fruit. An experienced berry grower, Angelo knows his plants and uses their appearance and growth pattern to identify water and nutritional needs – a skill that was confirmed later in the week by Frank Scherpenseel from Perfection Fresh! Angelo has also created his own trellising system with a distinctive v-shape that allows for more effective pest and disease management.



Angelo Pinna (L) and Mark Salter (R) in the tunnels at Athea where the Perfection Fresh 'Kwanza' variety of raspberries are grown. Photo credit: Wendy Morris

Innovations in trellising were also seen at the next stop, Queensland Berries at Caboolture, where Richard McGruddy took Wendy and Mark on a comprehensive tour of the farm. Some of the raspberry blocks were close to harvest while other blocks were just breaking bud where the canes have recently been transferred from the cool store and released into the tunnels.

Richard has a green cane storage facility where the raspberry canes are stored at below zero until they are ready to go into the tunnels. The canes are placed in the cool store to accumulate chill hours and then are gradually released into the tunnels at regular intervals which helps to lengthen the total harvest window.

Blackberries and strawberries are also grown on the Queensland Berries Caboolture site. The blackberry crops were approaching harvest, while strawberries were being planted ready for the winter production window. Interestingly, to ensure the delicate strawberries are

planted with proper care and attention, the planting shift length is shortened to around six hours which prevents workers from becoming overtired and careless.

Meanwhile, expansions at the farm were well underway. A new style worker's accommodation prototype was in place. The 'donga' comes complete with two bathrooms and a private kitchen and is designed to house four people. This will reduce the pressure on communal kitchens for the hundreds of staff required at peak harvesting times. In the strawberry production areas, new open air tabletop infrastructure was being installed in fields that were previously used for in-ground planting only.

After a busy day, it was time to hold the first of the two grower dinners. Approximately sixty growers and members of industry attended, and the evening featured presentations from the Queensland Department of Agriculture and Fisheries team and Growcom, as well as plenty of time for networking.



Mark Salter inspecting the canes being held in the cool store at Queensland Berries

Photo credit: Wendy Morris



Richard McGruddy (R) showing Wendy Morris (L) the new tabletops in the final stages of installation at Queensland Berries. Photo credit: Mark Salter

Dr Jodi Neal, Principal Plant Breeder and lead of the Australian Strawberry Breeding Program (ASBP), talked to growers about new varieties under trial, and there was open discussion about establishing a clearer understanding of the nutritional requirements for new varieties. my Nash, the new Queensland Agriculture Workforce Network (QAWN) Officer for south east Queensland also spoke to growers about the grants that are available to assist with training existing staff.

The next day the pair commenced the long trip from Caboolture to Stanthorpe where the first stop was Nathan Baronio from Eastern Colour, a farm which grows both strawberries and apples. The strawberries are grown on tabletops in polytunnels, and Nathan explained they have just moved their last block of in-ground strawberries to tabletops for improved production and harvest efficiencies.

Nathan has been proactive with improving irrigation efficiencies and has developed extra water storage to future-proof the farm in the event of another drought. He also mentioned that the very hot weather during the summer season had an adverse effect on fruit size, a fact which has been highlighted by some of the research reported on by Christopher Menzel in this journal previously. Due to a strong relationship with retail partner Woolworths, Nathan was able to agree a variation in the fruit size specification for smaller strawberries helping the business to sell the smaller fruit which would otherwise have been wasted.

A second grower dinner was held at the Stanthorpe Central Hotel, with similar topics to the previous night being discussed amongst the twenty growers and industry stakeholders who attended.



Richard McGruddy inspecting the blackberry canes at Queensland Berries

Photo credit: Wendy Morris



New long cane raspberry plants in tunnels at Queensland Berries

Photo credit: Wendy Morris



Attendees at the grower dinner held at the Sandstone Point Hotel on day one of Mark's visit

Photo credit: Wendy Morris



Jodi Neal from QDAF (L) and Dylan Bellchambers from Bitwise Agronomy (R) at the Stanthorpe dinner

Photo credit: Wendy Morris



Strawberry plugs recently planted in tabletops at Pinata Farms in Wamuran

Photo credit: Wendy Morris



Mark Salter (L) and the new General Manager for Berries at Piñata Farms Johan Oosthuizen (R)

Photo credit: Wendy Morris

On Mark's final morning, the pair met Johann Oosthuizen from Piñata Farms, where Johann has just started as General Manager – Berries, taking over from Liam Riedy who is leaving the business soon. 'Diamond Jubilee' raspberries are successfully grown under polytunnels on the farm, as well as tabletop strawberries. As with Eastern Colour, they had found the hot weather had impacted on the size of their strawberries, with fruit size well below average yet at the same time maintaining a good quality taste profile.

Later that day, it was time to head back to Caboolture for two last grower visits. Frank Scherpenseel at Perfection Fresh and one of his graduate students, Lin, made time in their busy schedule. Frank is working closely with strawberry growers this season to ensure that their plants establish quickly and with minimal pest and disease issues. The discussion covered several issues including the outlook for the season, minor use permit access to chemicals and seasonal labour availability.

Lastly, Wendy and Mark met with Paul Dydula from Paradise Berry Propagators. This newly established plant propagator supplied their first strawberry plugs to the market this year, with the plan of increasing the number of plugs available next year. Interestingly, the business is using mostly local labour on their farm. Paul says the advantage of employing locals is that most of them return to work on the farm year after year and so have valuable experience.

The trip was an excellent opportunity to see raspberry varieties being grown from BerryWorld, Driscoll's and Perfection Fresh. The value of the different breeding programs was evident, with fruit offering excellent taste and colour, and having greater longevity than earlier varieties. It was also interesting to see how important it was to trial different trellising systems, and the impact that the different styles can have on pest and disease management.

The impact of the extreme weather fluctuations in the south east Queensland truly can't be understated. The hot summer resulted in smaller fruit across the board, and necessitated careful adjustments to watering to protect plants from stress. The wet start to the winter season has delayed planting and many growers have not had sufficient time to properly prepare their fields.

Thank you to all of the growers who gave up their valuable time to meet with us, and everyone who attended the dinners, and a big thank-you to Mark Salter for sharing his expertise with the Queensland growers. Mark, we hope that you enjoy your well-earned retirement.



Mark Salter (L) and Brock McDonald from Growcom (R) at the Stanthorpe dinner

Photo credit: Wendy Morris