

Profile:

Henry Scott, Harvest Manager, Costa Group Berry Category

Mark Salter, Berry Industry Development Officer, Fruit Growers Tasmania

Henry Scott is Harvest Manager for Costa Group's berry category, where he oversees harvest and support for Costa's berry farms, including blackberries at the Dunorlan farm in Tasmania. I was able to catch up with him in Tasmania, and during my visit to Queensland where he is based most of the time.



Henry Scott examining the blackberry crop at Costa Berries in Tasmania

Photo credit: Mark Salter, Fruit Growers Tasmania

Henry's career with Costa began in Tasmania during his senior secondary school, where he would work with the company's maintenance team during his summer holidays. After a brief stint studying science at Swinburne University of Technology in 2015, Henry transferred to Monash University where he graduated in 2020 with honours as an engineer. During this period of study, Henry continued to spend his summers working for Costa Group in several casual harvest coordination roles.

In 2020 Henry signed on as a full-time member of the Costa team, first as a Harvest Lead and as part of Costa's continuous improvement team. In 2021 he began a new full-time role as the workforce planning and analytics lead to help the operational team with their decision-making during harvest. In 2022, Henry was appointed Harvest Manager for Costa's Berry Operations in Queensland.

Labour requirements

Costa have berry production sites in four states, which each have the following seasonal labour needs:

- Tasmania – 1500 employees
- New South Wales – 2000 employees
- Western Australia – 150 employees
- Queensland – 150-200 employees

To meet the workforce needs of these farms, Costa Group recruit through three different labour streams, which include two labour hire companies and their own recruiting program. Costa source the majority of their harvest labour through the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) Scheme, as well as a smaller proportion of backpackers and local workers.

Henry concedes the greatest challenge is having the optimal number of pickers at any given time and place during the harvest period. He also likes to get a feel for the various stages the crop is sitting at any given time, which helps with the harvest labour forecasting and decision-making process.

Forecasting plays a big role in having the right amount of people in the right places at the right time, which is particularly challenging given fruit volumes vary greatly throughout the peaks and troughs of the harvest season, and can be impacted at very short notice by adverse weather events.

Building leaders

Costa have a big focus on training to help new harvest workers to be as productive as possible, and a major part of Henry's role is developing training programs for harvest labour, harvest leaders and supervisors. He believes having good supervisors and harvest systems and providing a long harvest season helps make Costa a more attractive option compared to the many other horticultural harvest opportunities.

With limited people willing to take up seasonal work opportunities, one of Henry's challenges is making sure Costa remains an 'employer of choice', particularly for the transient labour sector. To achieve this, Henry takes a very hands-on approach and spends a great deal of time in the field helping with training delivery and seeking continuous feedback from everyone within the operation.

Harvest supervisor selection and training focuses on those workers that have prior harvest experience and who have demonstrated a strong connection, rapport, and respect for their team. Supervisors are trained in team leadership and to have a good understanding of the harvest KPI's, the mechanics of harvest, and be skilled at easily explaining daily messages to their team members. This is particularly important as the dynamics in the field change constantly during the harvest period.

Workforce training

For the wider workforce, Costa Tasmania split their labour into two groups, including a harvest group and an operational group. Henry explains that approximately 60% of Costa's harvest workforce are returning workers, with some returning back to Costa for over 8 years. Returning workers make up an important part of their harvest team, as these workers have previously been through the company's training programs and are more experienced, more productive and require less supervisory time to manage. It's also rewarding to see their development within the operation.

Training for new harvest workers begins in their country of origin where the program will focus on the selection process and preparing workers for picking prior to their departure. Once they reach the farm, the focus of training shifts to teaching workers the correct picking techniques and helping them to develop speed and efficiency. For new pickers Henry has developed a harvest training program that focuses on working in small picking groups, and once pickers are more confident, they will progress to become part of a larger picking team.

The operational team play a supportive role in the business, focusing on tunnel construction, maintenance, tractor work and driving the harvest chariots, and can also assist with the harvest if needed. At the end of the season these workers stay on to prune, mow down the canes, and plant new plants in preparation for the next season.

Having farms in multiple regions and states also gives some of Costa's harvest team the opportunity for more work, with PALM scheme workers able to take up a variety of visa timing options. This strategy helps to maintain the optimal number of people during harvest period, and rewards good workers with opportunities for longer term employment.

