

33rd Fruit Growers Tasmania Industry Conference 2025

Ella Roper, Berry Industry Development Officer, Fruit Growers Tasmania

The 33rd Fruit Growers Tasmania industry conference was recently held on 12-13 June 2025 in Hobart, and brought together berry, pome and stone fruit growers and industry representatives from around the state.

The key theme of the conference was ‘*Tasmanian grown quality*’ and consisted of two days packed with presentations and discussions, including grower perspectives, emerging research, innovations in growing practices and market updates. The berry industry played a key role in the event, which included technical speakers and grower presentations throughout the conference.

Michael Simonetta from Perfection Fresh was a keynote speaker on the first day and presented on how the pursuit of perfection has shaped the company from its humble beginnings as a market stall to a leading player in the fresh produce industry. He explained how Perfection Fresh has focused on key growing regions, varieties and branding to create customer recognition and to set themselves apart. Michael used a case study for raspberries to highlight where they were able to identify a market opportunity to provide premium fruit, develop a brand story and move towards a three-tiered approach for premium berry marketing. He emphasised the importance for companies to continue to evolve to remain successful, particularly in the increasingly competitive berry market.

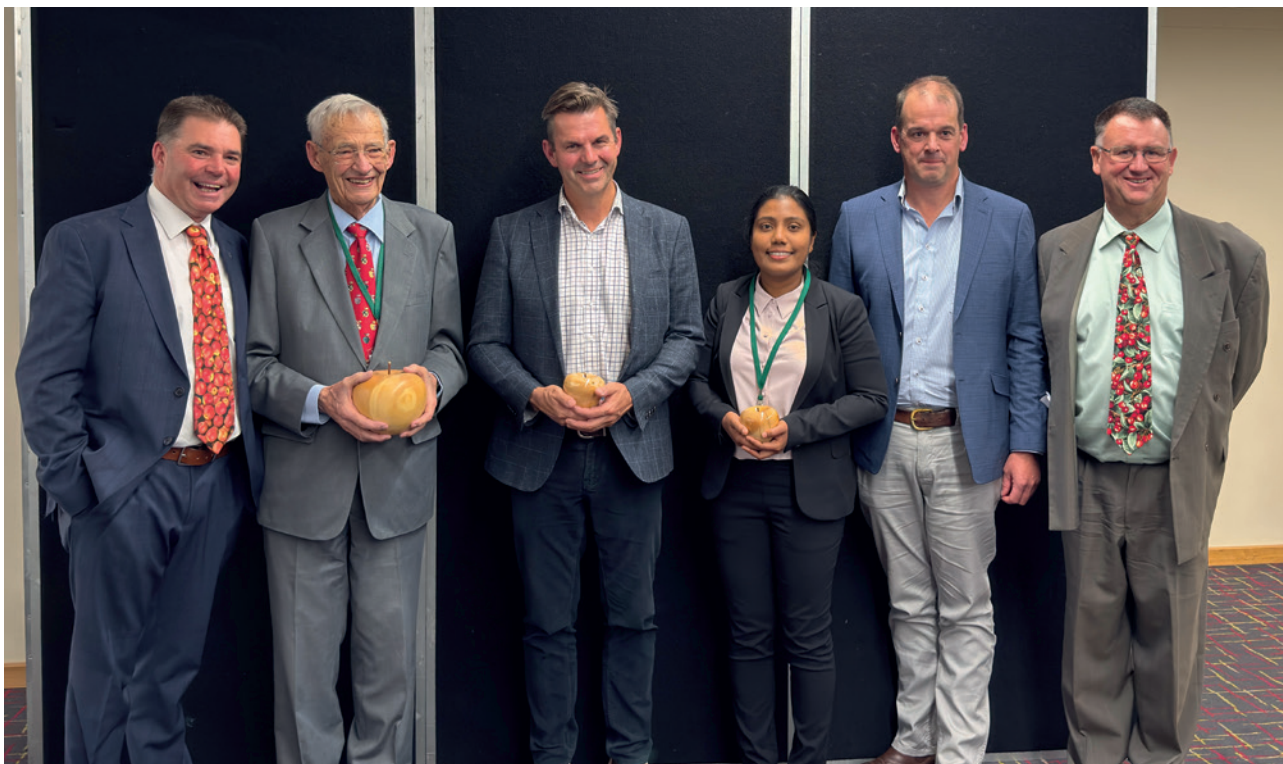
Dr Jonathan Finch from the Tasmanian Institute of Agriculture presented a Hort Frontiers-funded project that is investigating the impact of bumblebees on both Tasmanian ecosystems and horticultural production. The project aims to generate new data on the benefits and risks associated with bumblebees in Tasmania, including an economic analysis on the contribution of bumblebees to apple, cherry and berry crops, with trials to be run on three berry farms across Tasmania.

The research work will look at risks including the role bumblebees may play in the spread of invasive weeds such as foxgloves and will also investigate the contribution bumblebees play in berry crop pollination and how populations may be promoted in agricultural areas to improve pollination.

Jake Gaudion from RMCG gave a presentation on the Coir Reuse and Recycle project in substrate-grown strawberries. The project, led by Fruit Growers Tasmania, is now in its final year. The project was initially driven by industry in response to high coir shipping costs and lengthy delivery times after the pandemic, and is investigating ways to extend the lifespan of coir to reduce both costs and annual reliance on fresh supply. While coir costs have since returned to pre-COVID levels, a continued focus for growers has been on reusing or replacing coir with alternative substrates to either maintain or improve profitability. The project, in partnership with three Tasmanian berry growers, has run trials over the past two years investigating the effect of reused coir and alternative substrates on strawberry production, substrate drainage characteristics, plant yield and pathogen levels. Alternate substrates such as composted pink bark showed promising results in terms of improving porosity and drainage when mixed with reused coir. Troughs have also been trialled to reduce annual plastic waste when compared with coir bags, with some farms looking to convert more production to troughs to reduce plastic waste. The project will wrap up towards the end of 2025 and the outcomes will be reported in this journal.



Tristan Kitchener (Kitchener Partners) presenting on quality as a growth strategy



Industry award winners L-R: Howard Hansen with Carl Hansen (Hansen Orchards), Andrew Smith (R&R Smith), Uchitha (Bhashi) Godagenage with Cameron Folder (Costa Group) and Nic Hansen (Cherries Australia), President of Fruit Growers Tasmania



Keynote Speaker Michael Simonetta (Perfection Fresh)

Dr Lynne Forster from the Tasmanian Institute of Agriculture presented on the emerging berry pest, Bronze Leaf Beetle, which has been observed causing damage to berry crops in the north-west and south of the state. While the pest is not new to Tasmania, it has recently been observed causing increased damage to berry crops, where it can feed on leaves, flowers and fruits, impacting fruit quality and marketable yields. Lynne highlighted the beetle lifecycle and what to look for when scouting, including the life stages of the insect and the damage to leaves, flowers and fruit. She said monitoring the crop and controlling weeds that may harbour the beetle are important early management strategies especially under tunnel systems where the beetle may thrive in the warmer microclimate. You can find out more about this pest in the Pest Spotlight on PAGE 46.

Irrigation can play a major role in berry quality, and Stephen Welsh from Agri-Tech Pacific presented on irrigation strategies to improve fruit quality in berry crops. He highlighted that berry fruit quality and size is influenced by precise rootzone moisture control and nutrient management, and how irrigation can be used to steer berry crops through the vegetative and generative cycles. Stephen emphasised that using the

right irrigation and nutrition strategy at the right time is critical for various stages of berry crop growth, such as adjusting the irrigation strategy in terms of watering frequency, drain percentage and nightly dry down to help support fruit and crop development.

Kate Sutherland, Managing Director of Burlington Berries provided a perspective on profitable quality in the increasingly competitive berry market. She highlighted the importance of targeting high quality right through the production system, from berry genetics and nursery material to fruit quality at harvest, having good cool chain management and reporting capabilities. Kate also highlighted the importance of social licence in supporting and building a reputation in the community.

The international and export markets were also a focus for the conference. Joanne Chen, CEO of Citistore and Unicorn Stores in Hong Kong presented a retailer's perspective on the fresh produce market, highlighting consumers' evolving focus towards health and wellbeing, premiumisation and demand for luxury gifting during festivities. Joanne explained that there is a high demand in Hong Kong for premium imported fresh berries from countries such as Australia, which is associated with clean, safe and high-end produce.



Fruit Growers Tasmania Conference attendees networking at the Trade Show

Wayne Prowse from Fresh Intelligence also gave an overview of the changing landscape of global fresh fruit trade, showing the steady increase in blueberry imports and exports over the past decade.

Other conference topics included an update on labour and workforce from Claire McClelland, Chief Executive Officer of the Australian Fresh Produce Alliance, and a highlight on profitability through performance management from Sarah McArley from AgFirst. There was also a variety of presentations on pome and stone fruit management including a talk from Jake Newnham of Lowdina Orchard, who spoke about optimising post-harvest quality in cherries, a topic he investigated as part of his recent Nuffield Scholarship. A high percentage of Australia cherries go to the export market and compete with high volumes of cheaper fruit particularly from Chile. Jake highlighted that because Tasmanian growers cannot compete on price with Chilean fruit, the focus should be on promoting a quality brand recognition and demand for premium fruit.

The Industry Awards Dinner was held on the evening of the first conference day, highlighting the outstanding contributions of growers who help shape the fruit industry in Tasmania. Uchitha (Bhashi) Godahenage was awarded the **Young Grower of the Year** for her efforts as Farm Manager of the Costa Tasmanian Blackberry Farm. You can find out more about her on PAGE 106. Andrew Smith of R&R Smith was awarded the **Award for Excellence**, and Carl Hansen of Hansen Orchards was awarded the prestigious **Roll of Honour Lifetime Achievement Award**.

Nearly 220 growers, researchers and industry members attended the conference, networking drinks and Gala Dinner over the two days.

Fruit Growers Tasmania would like to thank all the industry sponsors who helped to make the 33rd Conference a resounding success.



All photos credit: Fruit Growers Tasmania