

Fruit Growers Tasmania

Young Grower of the Year:

Uchitha Bhashini Godahenage

Ella Roper, Berry Industry Development Officer, Fruit Growers Tasmania

Costa Blackberry Farm Manager Uchitha (Bhashi) Godahenage was recently awarded the **'Young Grower of the Year'** at the Fruit Growers Tasmania Industry Awards dinner in June. The award is presented to young individuals who show exceptional leadership skills within their business and have a keen interest in developing skills and knowledge in all areas of production.

Bhashi manages the Costa blackberry farm in north-west Tasmania, overseeing approximately 40 hectares of substrate and soil plantings under polytunnel systems. With a university background and experience in harvest management, technical horticulture and farm business management, Bhashi took on the role of Blackberry Farm Manager in June last year.

Born and raised in Sri Lanka, Bhashi comes from a family farming background, with her family running a cinnamon cultivation. She says farming is a common practice in Sri Lanka and seeing her family's commitment and passion in growing and harvesting crops inspired her to pursue a career in agriculture.

Bhashi completed a Bachelor of Agriculture in Sri Lanka, providing her with a strong foundation in agricultural production and growing systems. With a dream of exploring more of the world, she applied for a Master of Agriculture course in Australia and was accepted on a scholarship to the University of Tasmania, which she commenced in 2017. Bhashi says completing her master's degree broadened her understanding of the diverse growing systems and production techniques used in Australia, which contrasted with those commonly practised in Sri Lanka. While moving to Australia was a big life change, she says the support of her peers and

lecturers at UTAS helped her to continue pursuing her degree. As part of her final master's coursework, Bhashi undertook her core project in post-harvest quality in strawberries which looked at ways to maintain fruit quality and shelf-life in the highly perishable berry fruits, from harvest through the cool-chain and to market.

After graduating, Bhashi applied for a harvest supervisor role at Costa and was instead offered the role as Blackberry Harvest Lead, managing harvest teams through the busy blackberry season from December to June.

"I was new to berries, and it was a challenging role at first so it was all about learning, but I was lucky to have great mentorship and developed good experience in that first year."

After a further two years of harvest management in both blackberries and raspberries, Bhashi moved into a horticultural role to put her academic and technical learnings from university into practice in the blackberry crop.

"I had a really great horticultural team who were good at helping and supporting each other and I was able to learn and develop my own practical skills to improve the crop."



Bhashi took on the role of Blackberry Farm Manager in June 2024 Photo credit: Costa

After two years as Blackberry Horticulturalist, a vacancy came up in the role of Farm Manager on the Blackberry Farm. Through her roles as Harvest Lead and Horticulturalist, Bhashi gained extensive experience and a deep understanding of many aspects of farm operations, including business management, crop technical management, harvest supervision, financial budgeting, and of course leadership. “I thought I would just give it a go and was lucky enough to get the role. I have now just wrapped up one year as Farm Manager.”

While she is responsible for many aspects of the farm from harvest to horticulture to financial business management, Bhashi says the main focus for her is people. “The role for me is all about managing people and having good communication through the team.” Bhashi oversees the farm’s core leadership team and a maintenance crew of around 20 to 30 people. During peak harvest season, she also manages an additional workforce of up to 400 pickers.

Bhashi said the role and managing large teams of people has been challenging at times but that she has always felt very well supported in her role.

“The leadership and mentoring have been great all the way through, and while it’s not always an easy role, I think these have made me stronger as a person and has made me more ready to overcome future challenges.”

Another important part of her role is to make sure crop management practices are done on time, for which she relies on her horticultural team for input and to assist planning for the season. As of late June, Bhashi and the blackberry team are in the midst of pruning the crop and making sure the plants are prepared and presented for harvest. Harvest is the major activity in berries and Bhashi says significant efforts go into looking at maximising harvest efficiencies and fruit quality. She says innovations in technology are likely to play a more significant role in improving harvest and other farm efficiencies going forward.

“There are increasing technical advancements and automation coming through, however we need to make sure we get the maximum out of them by building skills and understanding in our people.”



L-R: Carl Hansen of Hansen Orchards, Andrew Smith of R&R Smith and Uchitha (Bhashi) Godahenage from Costa with their respective industry awards Photo credit: Fruit Growers Tasmania

Farming can be unpredictable and inevitably things don't always go to plan. Bhashi says a major part of being able to overcome challenges is having good planning systems in place to prevent or deal with issues efficiently. "Setting up strategies with the team is really important and making sure everyone is aware of what we need to do, including having input and respecting each other's ideas." Bhashi says the blackberry team is a relatively young team and she has found proactive collaboration a good way of troubleshooting issues. "I really enjoy working with the team for solutions to problems; everyone brings a different perspective and there is respect throughout."

As the recent awardee of the Fruit Growers Tasmania 'Young Grower of the Year', Bhashi joins a respected list of young growers and leaders in the fruit industry. "It was a very humbling experience and a big honour," she says of the award. "As someone growing in their career it means so much to be recognised." She says that the recognition is also a testament to her team and the work they put in. "I'm really fortunate to have a leadership team that recognises our efforts, and I feel so lucky to have this great team of people who motivate and support me."

Bhashi hopes that young people being recognised in awards such as this helps inspire other young people to get into the industry.

"Whether your passion is technical science and innovation, sustainability or business leadership, there is a place in agriculture for everyone. The industry needs young people coming through to build knowledge and skills and to be the next leaders."

