

Queensland 2025 Strawberry Field Day

Wendy Morris, Queensland Berry Industry Development Officer, Berries Australia

We were blessed with beautiful weather for this year's Queensland Strawberry Field Day. On the Go Espresso kicked us into gear with as many hot beverages as we could consume, before the DPI team welcomed us to the Maroochy Research Facility near Nambour on the Sunshine Coast.

Principal Plant Breeder Dr Jodi Neal provided us with an update presentation on the Australian Strawberry Breeding Program (ASBP) before leading the growers out into the trial patch to sample and provide feedback on some of the new plants currently in the program. Whether or not these plants will proceed to the next stage is based on a number of factors, including our growers' opinions. The plant breeding team has provided a full update of their ASBP activities, and you can read more about this at PAGE 92.

Biggest Strawberry Winner

To add a bit of friendly competition, we introduced a 'Biggest Strawberry Competition' this year. AgBiTech were quick to come on board as a sponsor, allowing us to offer a trophy and \$250 EFTPOS gift card as first prize. AgBiTech also donated a bottle of ViVUS Armigen (a biological insecticide for the control of Helicoverpa) as a second prize.

There are good years to run this type of competition, and then there are years like 2025, when Queensland fruit production is slow, and the size of strawberries is below average. Unfortunately, we received just two entries on the day, with Piñata Farms and SunSweet Berries putting their fruit up for measurement.

Jimmy Lai from SunSweet Berries won the day, with a 75g Red Rhapsody, easily beating out Piñata Farms by a solid 10 grams.

A number of growers have subsequently informed me they believe they can grow bigger strawberries on their farm so we hope to see you and your whopping strawberries in 2026!

Strawberry Workshop

In keeping with our desire to switch things up a bit, instead of formal presentations we elected to hold a strawberry workshop with an expert panel. Dr Jodi Neal from QDPI, Angus Durham from Smartbug Horti and Adrian Schultz from the Queensland Strawberry Growers Association formed our panel and opened themselves up to 'whatever the growers wanted to talk about' – a tough ask!

We were very lucky to have a good selection of growers, propagators and industry representatives in the room, and it wasn't long before we were discussing some of the key issues growers were facing on-farm.

Managing plant nutrition and growth formed the basis of most of the discussion. Ian Mungall from Red Jewel advised Queensland winter growers that planting before 22 March will lead to more vegetative growth, which growers need to manage. Planting after 22 March will help mitigate excess runner production from plants but may impact early yields.

Temperamental weather has led to delayed flowering and fruiting. Fruit that does come through has in many cases been softer than desired. Calcium can improve firmness and quality and is generally more effective when delivered via fertigation than foliar application. Calcium uptake improves when plants are transpiring, so checking the weather conditions before adding calcium to your solution will ensure you are adding it at a point when plants will utilise it. Also, be aware that a plant that is very bushy can redirect calcium from its fruit to its leaves.

Nitrogen, nitrogen, nitrogen... determining how much a new variety needs has been a constant source of frustration for our growers. At the QDPI trial patch, all Australian Strawberry Breeding Program (ASBP) plants are fed the same nutritional mix. For non-ASBP varieties, growers may be given nutritional information that isn't adjusted to local conditions and must be adjusted to the local growing environment (including water EC, soil types, weather patterns).



Dr Jodi Neal provided an update presentation at the start of the Field Day



Fergus Tweedy from AgBiTech awarding Jimmy Lai from SunSweet Berries with his well-earned trophy and \$250 gift voucher for his 75g 'Red Rhapsody' winning berry



For those who were unable to attend the Field Day in person, a video version is now available to watch through the Resource Library which includes Dr Jodi Neal's update presentation, a look at two of the most promising new potential varieties and some reflections from one of the growers attending the day.

View the video at bit.ly/Q-STR-160725 or search 'Strawberry Field Day' in the Resource Library at bit.ly/BA-RL



Attendees were asked to use red flags to signal the varieties in the trial patch that they felt had promise based on the plant health, the radar chart displaying their characteristics and the taste of the fruit samples available



Samples of trial variety fruit grown at Taste n'See were also available for attendees to inspect and taste

Growers questioned what broad statements like 'high nitrogen variety' or 'low nitrogen variety' actually mean, given we have so many farms growing in different conditions (different soil types, tables, protected cropping).

Leaf and sap analyses can be a useful addition to current soil tests as they show what nutrients the plant is taking up. Kerran from Zadco attended the workshop and recommended growers test at 8-10 weeks and 15 weeks post-planting to see what nutrients their plants are holding.

On a different note, workforce challenges remain a major pressure point for growers. The absence of a national labour hire licensing system is a continuing source of frustration, while finding and keeping skilled staff is an ongoing struggle for many farmers.

There was also a wide range of tips and insights shared, some practical, some surprising. Noticed white noses on your strawberries? Check your boron levels. Seeing red leaf? Researchers think they're getting closer to understanding the cause. Planning a new irrigation trench? Lay an extra pipe while you're at it. You might not need it now, but pipe is cheap and digging a second trench later is not!

Overall, the workshop was a great success thanks to the involvement of our panel and attendees, who openly shared and discussed their experiences.

Thank you to our growers, QDPI, AgBiTech, and industry stakeholders for making the day possible!

All photos credit: Jane Richter

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