

Berries Australia

Board Member: Andrew Terry, Tasmanian Berries

Mark Salter, Berry Industry Development Officer, Fruit Growers Tasmania

Andrew and Stephanie Terry began their berry-growing venture in 2013, when they signed on with Driscoll's to grow their berry varieties. In 2014, Tasmanian Berries was established over two sites in Central Northern Tasmania. They developed a brand-new site of four hectares of in-ground strawberries on their home farm at Exton and purchased an existing 11-hectare berry business approximately 10 kilometres west, at Christmas Hills.

After a season of high picker turnover due to the labour-intensive nature of the in-ground harvest at Exton, the business invested in converting all strawberry production to hydroponically grown plants on tabletop infrastructure. The move was driven by the need for a system that was more favourable to the picking crew for day-on-day harvest, in turn creating a more productive harvest and easier-to-manage plants, especially for pest and disease control.

In the following seasons, the varieties grown at both sites were streamlined so that one site was used solely for strawberry production and the other for Rubus. The Rubus varieties were Driscoll's raspberry genetics and a mixture of Driscoll's and public variety blackberries. With annual site expansion at Exton, Andrew looked for more ways to set the business's production apart from the traditional market trends.

In 2017, Andrew travelled to Scotland on a study tour to investigate hydroponic blackberry production under tunnels. The tour proved valuable, and in 2020 he began on-farm trials to test the viability of double-cropping

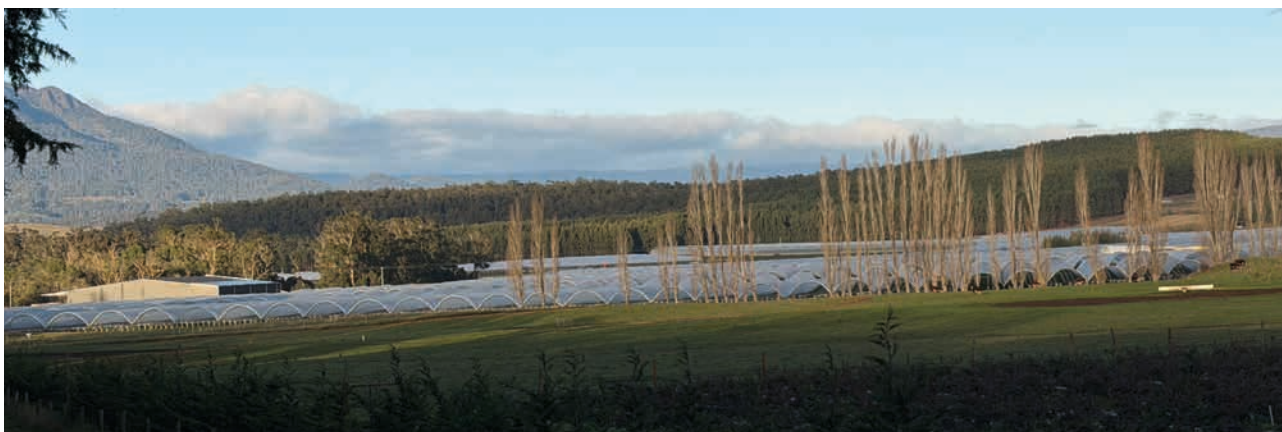
blackberries to maximise seasonal yield. This included investing in a fully enclosed, hydronically heated hot house on site, to study how heat can affect the crop compared to production in traditional polytunnels.

The trials were successful, leading to the development of five hectares of multi-span gothic-style greenhouses. The development required significant financial investment, planning, building approvals, civil works, and a dedicated project team to construct the structures over almost two years.

The greenhouses are approximately six metres at their highest point, and the climate within the houses is controlled by automated fans, roller doors, and roof vents that respond to temperature, sunlight, and humidity. Temperature can be increased or maintained by a self-sufficient system whereby the interior air is drawn into the dual polythene walls of the house and pumped around; this acts as a thermal break from the outside temperature. Many modifications have been made since the houses were constructed to help create ideal site-specific conditions.



Andrew & Stephanie Terry inside the hothouse blackberry operation Photo credits: Mark Salter and Tasmanian Berries



The home farm site at Exton where strawberries, blueberries and blackberries are all currently grown

Photo credits: Mark Salter

Current production

Tasmanian Berries has had a long-term strategy to develop the business and produce high-quality berries across all four berry categories: raspberries, strawberries, blackberries, and blueberries, while remaining commercially viable to operate and expand each season.

To do this, land acquisitions of neighbouring properties in Tasmania and an investment in a Queensland site in 2023, operating as Sunshine Berries, have been made.

This helped to create year-round production and extended workforce opportunities for their seasonal workers. The business going into the 2026/27 season will consist of:

- 40 hectares of strawberries, forecast to produce more than 2,500 tonnes of fruit;
- 20 hectares of raspberries, forecast to produce 500 tonnes of fruit;
- 23 hectares of blackberries, forecast to produce 850 tonnes of fruit; and
- 23 hectares of recently planted blueberries, with the first commercial crop expected this summer.

Post-harvest and cool chain logistics

In 2023, Andrew invested in a 3,500 square metre pack shed, cooling and dispatch facility at the Exton site to manage the large volumes of fruit moving through the harvest window. The site includes several large cool stores with multiple functions. During harvest, they play a vital role in the post-harvest cool chain process, removing field heat through blast chilling and allowing fruit to be rapidly pulled down to the target temperature.

In the off season, the cool rooms are used to cool store dormant raspberry and blackberry long canes,

until they are ready to be returned to the tunnels and greenhouses for the following season's production. The cooling system is powered predominantly by solar panels mounted on the northwestern side of the facility's roof. They use the daylight hours to complement the harvest period each day by powering the cooling of the produce.

The facility also enables sanitary storage of packaging, creating more sustainable processes. Previously the use of outdoor storage bays would lead to packaging being blown around or thrown away due to impacts from weather and wildlife. The dispatch area includes a docking system designed to minimise heat ingress during loading, as well as more efficient and safer loading systems for employees.

The second stage of the facility is planned for this year and will include the installation of a series of packing lines to quality and weight check individual punnets, and automate labour-intensive, repetitive jobs, creating a more sustainable business model as labour costs continue to increase.

Plastics and coir separation

The annual challenge of removing used coir bags from tunnels and separating expired plant material and the plastics they are housed in has been an ongoing project for Tasmanian Berries. Many systems have been researched, trialled and implemented over the years, but none were the perfect combination of commercially, environmentally and socially viable.

In 2024, Andrew expanded his research to international systems to help improve the systems already in operation. His aim was to find a balance of commercial viability and environmental benefit by reducing waste to landfill while keeping the valuable, expired materials in circulation for as long as possible, creating an on-farm circular economy.

His research led him to trial specialised machinery to shred, separate, and sieve the plastics from the plant and coir materials, significantly reducing the waste to be disposed of. The separated natural products are then able to be refined into nutrient-rich compost to improve paddocks for livestock and crop production on the remainder of the farm.

This system reduces manual labour and therefore the risk to workers' health and safety. It also reduces time spent on the job, the number of trucks on the road to disposal sites, and allows compression of the plastic for more efficient, cleaner disposal.

This system has been recognised by the Tasmanian Waste and Resource Recovery Board, with the business receiving a grant to invest in the machinery required to implement this system on the farm annually, giving them the ability to provide this service to other businesses. It also allows for the recycled compost to be used in trials into the viability of recycled coir substrate for Rubus production.

Labour and workforce management

Labour remains a major operational challenge. As an Approved Employer for the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) Scheme, Tasmanian Berries has made significant investments to provide pastoral care, support and transport to the workers in both Tasmania and Queensland. They have also invested in accommodation to house their PALM workforce of almost 500 workers per year, to ensure a stable, returning workforce each season.

Industry Board involvement

Andrew and Stephanie's commitment to the berry industry extends beyond their own business, as they both contribute to several industry organisations and boards, including:

Berries Australia, where Andrew sits on the board; Raspberries and Blackberries Australia Inc (RABA), where Andrew also serves as Vice President; Fruit Growers Tasmania, where Andrew sits on the board representing Tasmanian berry growers; and Primary Employers Tasmania, a registered Employer Organisation, which advocates for and provides industrial relations advice to members. Stephanie serves as President, and as a member organisation of the National Farmers Federation (NFF), Stephanie sits on the NFF's Workforce Committee.

Future plans

Tasmanian Berries is now focused on investing in areas that can improve efficiencies across the operation, including the packing facility. Andrew believes this area of the business offers the strongest opportunity to achieve productivity gains and streamline production.



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