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Protecting Australia's beloved avocados

Researchers are working with the Australian avocado industry to safeguard one of nation's favourite fruits for years to come.

Funded by Hort Innovation – and being delivered by the University of Queensland State-Government-supported research institute, the Queensland Alliance for Agriculture and Food Innovation (QAAFI) – the work targets both existing and emerging avocado disease threats.

Hort Innovation chief executive John Lloyd said Australian avocados have never been more popular with domestic consumption tripling over the past 20 years from 30,000 tonnes to 90,000 tonnes.

“There is no arguing avocados are everywhere, on café menus, on television, in pop culture... there is even an avocado emoji,” he said. “What this research aims to do is protect a fruit that Australians are highly affectionate about, for decades to come.”

QAAFI horticultural scientist Dr Liz Dann said the orchard disease management component she is leading is about improving yields and fruit quality and building capacity to deal with biosecurity issues.

As part of the project, Dr Dann will work with industry to help prevent the spread of any avocado disease outbreaks in nurseries and orchards around Australia.

“My work has a strong field component,” Dr Dann said. “I am there to support industry - if there is a problem with disease in the orchard, they contact me,” says Dr Dann. “I am constantly reviewing the disease management practices, and trialling new products or approaches for reducing the impact of the many diseases which affect avocados.”

While Dr Dann's focus is management of existing diseases of avocado orchards such as Phytophthora Root Rot, her colleague, Dr Andrew Geering's focus is on developing diagnostic tests to protect the industry against new threats.

“Sometimes the biosecurity threats are well understood but others seem to pop out of the blue,” Dr Geering said.

“A good example of a pest that was not previously on anyone's radar is the fungal disease Laurel wilt, which is spread by the tiny Redbay ambrosia beetle and is now decimating the avocado industry in Florida.

“As soon as the beetle bores into the trunk of an avocado tree and introduces the fungus, the whole tree just collapses within a month.

“There is no resistance. We don't have the beetle in Australia yet – but it is vital we have good diagnostic tests for a wide range of pests and pathogens.”

Dr Dann said all diseases are manageable. “We just need the tools and the capacity to maintain current biosecurity processes, and to meet emerging challenges.”

Australia produces around 66,000 tonnes of avocados annually, with a wholesale value of \$534 million. Around sixty percent of Australian households purchase avocados, buying an average of nearly half a kilo per shopping trip.

Avocado production occurs mainly in Queensland and Northern New South Wales during the winter and in Western Australia during the summer.

MEDIA CONTACT: Hort Innovation - Kelly Vorst-Parkes kelly.vorst-parkes@horticulture.com.au or 0447 304 255. QAAFI - Dr Liz Dann (07) 3443 2455 or e.dann@uq.edu.au and Dr Andrew Geering (07) 34432459 or a.geering@uq.edu.au



