

Grower profile

Simon Dornauf: Hillwood Berries



Growing from 'labour pains'

The Dornauf family has farmed in the Meander Valley, north of Launceston, for three generations. Their involvement with berries began 30 years ago, when Simon's father, Robin, began growing raspberries for domestic and export markets. Simon has since been involved in the berry industry for several years, including representing Tasmania on the peak industry body, Strawberries Australia.



Simon Dornauf, Hillwood Berries Farm Manager

Transitioning to soil-less production

Accessing and retaining labour became a pivotal turning point for the business, especially as other farms in the area moved to growing in substrate on table tops. Hillwood began to find the competition for seasonal workers to pick in-field strawberries too great to not change.

Living by Simon's mottos of "don't die wondering" and "why not have a crack?" Hillwood made the decision at the end of the 2016 season to convert 13 ha of strawberries to 10 ha of tabletops and 3 ha of raspberries.

The initial transition wasn't without its challenges. This was largely due to delays in ordering plants which resulted in a late start to production, with the first season's plants in substrate achieving a yield of only 900 grams of fruit per plant.

Production with table tops, however, has since made a big difference, including an increase in planting density from around 50,000 plants per hectare to 76,000 plants per hectare, and more predictable crop availability when plants are grown under cover in substrate. Over the last 5 years, the first day of picking each season has been within a window of around 9 days.

SIMON'S ADVICE

For anyone wanting to move to protected cropping and substrate: 'You'll need a strong stomach'

Elevation of the plants on the table tops makes other aspects of crop management, such as pest control, simpler as the crop is easier to monitor.

Pest and disease problems still occur, such as powdery mildew early in the season, and botrytis later when temperatures drop and humidity increases, but having the plants at waist height makes it easier to control.

Simon Dornauf: Hillwood Berries



Simon has implemented a comprehensive integrated pest management (IPM) program, including releases of Persimilis to control two spotted mites, and Orius for Western flower thrip (WFT). Growing in substrate, Simon also adds Hypoaspis to the grow bags for beneficial biological activity, including the control of WFT larvae. Hillwood exclusively grow the Driscoll's variety Amesti. All fruit is field graded, weighed and packed and uses barcode traceability for quality control. Packed fruit is cooled on farm before distribution by Driscoll's.

Simon's advice to anyone wanting to move to substrate production under tunnels is to do as much research as you can, travel to see what is being done around the world, and a word of caution that you'll "need a strong stomach".

Simon recalls during one weather event watching 2 hectares of tunnel being "smashed in front of his eyes", including a 40 metre tunnel "turned into a pretzel".

Investing in people

Hillwood berries have not looked back from the decision to transition to soil-less production under Haygrove tunnels, which has helped them to source their labour through the seasonal worker program.

Hillwood first used the program via a labour provider, but have since moved to directly managing the seasonal worker program themselves. Simon says by managing the program he can have more control over the workers they hire and can also look after their workforce better. The business has also been pro-active in sourcing accommodation for their seasonal workers, which is provided in Launceston around 20 minutes from the farm.

In addition to having a strong focus on the quality of their product, Hillwood continues to invest in their team. Simon has forged a strong relationship with University of Tasmania, and has two full time agronomists on his team – which is

TIMELINE OF PROTECTED CROPPING PRODUCTION AT HILLWOOD BERRIES

- 2011:** 2 ha of in-ground strawberry production established
- 2016:** 18 ha developed for berry production on table tops with substrate
- 2017:** 34 ha developed for berry production on table tops with substrate - including 1,200 tonne strawberries



In-field packing and quality control at Hillwood berries



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