

An organic enterprise



By ANN CLIFF

Sunny Creek berry farm in Gippsland, Victoria has been certified organic for quarter of a century; that's 25 years of sustainable production. It's an impressive enterprise that has much to teach anyone embarking on organic production.

Phil Rowe and Cathie Taylor applied for certification in 1988, soon after it became available, from the National Association for Sustainable Agriculture Australia (NASAA). They had established their enterprise on organic lines a few years before this, on a north facing slope of the Strzeleckis.

Ten hectares of the farmland is occupied by orchards and they are surrounded by regenerated native bush, which forms a

protective windbreak for the fruit. Raspberries in particular must be happy here, as they were originally woodland plants.

Not far from the Princes Highway and about two hours east of Melbourne, this farm offers 'pick your own fruit' and farm gate sales in an idyllic setting, for the whole of the summer school holidays.

Phil Rowe says he's a collector and over the years they have collected over 100 varieties of berries, including 40 kinds of raspberry: red, black, yellow, pink and purple. There are heritage apples including my own favourite, Cox's orange pippin; there are chestnuts and several kinds of blackberry.

Loganberries, also found at Sunny Creek, are the result of a cross between a blackberry and a red raspberry. The fruit is dark red and the flavour is excellent. This berry (*Rubus x loganobaccus*) is named after an American lawyer and gardener who was trying to breed an improved blackberry, but created the new berry by accident.

Likewise, the youngberry was developed in USA by a Mr Young. It's a complicated cross between blackberry, raspberry and dewberry.

At Sunny Creek you will find walnuts, nashi fruit and persimmons (an orange fruit that is technically a berry.) Then there are redcurrants, white currants and gooseberries. This is a gardener's paradise as well as a food forest, an opportunity to widen your knowledge of cool climate fruit.

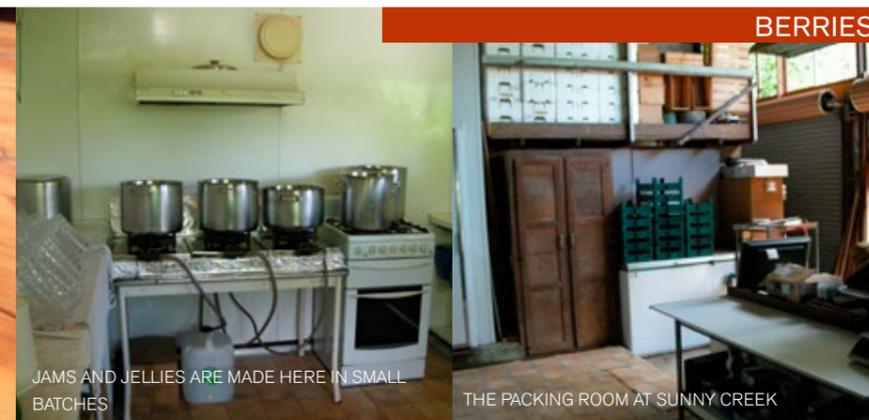
'Cocktail berries' are a speciality here, a mixture of up to 10 different berries, the punnets a riot of colours and tastes. They are naturally popular over Christmas and New Year.

The range of fruit varieties enables the farm to operate with summer and autumn seasons, spreading the workload, although the summer season is the busiest.

In addition to selling fruit to people who come to pick their own harvest, the family sells fresh and frozen fruit both wholesale and retail, plus a tempting range of jams, jellies and sauces.



THE PRODUCE: MARIONBERRY JAM MADE FROM CULTIVATED BLACKBERRIES



JAMS AND JELLIES ARE MADE HERE IN SMALL BATCHES

THE PACKING ROOM AT SUNNY CREEK

Mid November to March is the season for fresh summer berries. The list includes raspberries, strawberries, blueberries and some blackberry varieties: silvan (developed in Australia), marion (bred in Oregon, USA) and waldo blackberries. Waldo is a thornless blackberry, which must make picking much less hazardous.

April to June, the autumn period, offers autumn blackberries, some varieties of raspberries and strawberries, apples and chestnuts as well as nashi and feijoa.

This is a family concern and each member of the family has specific responsibilities. Phil and Cathie share the farm management; Phil Rowe does the off-season planting and maintenance and dispatches fresh fruit. He also devotes time to sharing his hard-earned expertise with others. Phil is President of Raspberries and Blackberries Australia, a body which represents Australian berry growers. He is also a Director of NASAA and its subsidiary, NASAA Certified Organic..

Cathie Taylor manages the summer harvest. She organises casual staff to pick the fruit; the farm web site offers good advice for would-be pickers, who are given two training sessions before starting work. She looks for able-bodied people with 'nimble fingers, observant eyes and a busy work attitude.' Sunglasses are banned because pickers need to see the true colour of the fruit, so that only ripe berries are picked.

She packs fruit for sale and organises farm gate sales and pick-your own visitors and does the accounts. On top of all this, Cathie is a full-time primary school teacher – she must be very good at time management.

The visitors who come to harvest their own fruit are encouraged to bring a picnic and make a day of it, but understandably there is no catering at the farm. Visitors can buy a 'grazing pass' for \$5.50, to allow for the temptation to eat as you pick.

In the cooler months, the pace doesn't slacken. This is the time when preserves are made from fruit that was frozen during the harvest period. 20 different jams and jellies are prepared in small batches, containing only fruit and sugar. Because the fruit contains varying amounts of pectin, the natural setting agent, some preserves are runnier than others.

The couple's children grew up on the farm and they usually come home each year to help with the summer harvest. Shelley, Nyssa and James also bring their expertise to the business, James in the realm of IT and Shelley in marketing and promotion.

BELOW RIGHT: STRAWBERRIES GROWN IN BOXES. THE BOXES CAN BE CHANGED AFTER A FEW YEARS BUT THE STANDS WILL REMAIN, SO THAT STRAWBERRIES CAN CONTINUE TO BE GROWN IN THE SAME AREA.



MELBA, AN EARLY STRAWBERRY DEVELOPED IN VICTORIA, AT GOLDSTREAM ON THE MELBA HIGHWAY



REDCURRANTS ARE NOT EASILY OBTAINABLE, USED FOR REDCURRANT JELLY



TOP RIGHT: SHELTERED AND NETTED ORGANIC FRUIT.
RIGHT: MULCHED RASPBERRY CANES, SUPPORTED ON WIRES.



ORGANIC CERTIFICATION

NASAA, a non-profit organisation, is one of several bodies that carry out independent organic certification of producers. Its aim is to develop and maintain organic standards and to help people to achieve certification, a rigorous process and not easily achieved.

Regular inspection and auditing ensures that standards are maintained for primary producers, manufacturers, distributors and retailers, with over 1,000 certified operators on the books.

To the question 'why organic?' this family answers 'why not?' They believe in healthy food, grown in healthy soils that are not being degraded, a belief that many consumers share. A growing number of people are looking for food they can trust, and for this reason they like to buy from the producer, and with organic certification.

If you can't grow your own, the next best choice is to pick your own fruit. It reduces to a minimum the time between paddock and plate, always a good thing to do because the fresher the produce, the more nutritious it is.

Organic produce avoids the possibility of chemical residues, artificial ingredients and genetically modified material. It results in better balanced nutrition and better flavours. Some of the old varieties grown here are not often seen elsewhere; the farm is also doing its bit to preserve 'heritage' varieties, some of which are grown simply because they make good jam.

Sunny Creek berry farm is inspected every year and has an external audit in addition to their own internal one, to maintain accreditation.

ORGANIC METHODS

The farming methods here are designed to minimise the impact on the environment, with protection of the soils and maintenance of biodiversity, because the family see themselves as stewards of the land. Half the farm is given over to regenerated forest, but the family say that this is the reason the berries grow so well here.

No herbicides are used on this farm. Weeds are slashed, mulched, composted and recycled, to become an asset rather than a problem. Phil says that he also manages without insecticides and unless there is a plague of locusts, he will continue to do so. Birds help with insect control, but the fruit must be netted in the season to keep fruit-eating birds at bay.

More of a problem than the birds are possums. An avenue of pecan nut trees has been stripped of leaves and even under nets, the berries are not entirely safe. Clever possums have learned how to use their weight to make the netting sag down to the tops of the bushes, so they can feast on the leaves. Small young possums worm their way in at ground level and help themselves to berries, secure from predators under the nets. Organic production is hard work, with no short cuts to success!

Some fertiliser is brought in to maintain fertility, although berries don't deplete the soil as much as some vegetables. Phil uses horse manure to make compost and also buys pelleted poultry manure.

THE CUSTOMERS

People take to the winding road in the hills for a variety of reasons; some visitors to the berry farm come here every summer, many from Melbourne, often bringing their children to let them see how food is grown.

Some customers visit Sunny Creek because of the organic certification and the health benefits of organic produce. Many of the reasons why we should eat fruit and nuts have been known

for a long time and others have appeared more recently. Blueberries and raspberries in particular are regarded as health foods. Apart from the high levels of vitamins, particularly C, blueberries provide fibre and minerals and are one of the best sources of antioxidants. Blueberries in the diet are thought to protect brain cells from damage and increase their ability to transmit signals. Other suggested benefits include cancer prevention, reduction of inflammation and the regulation of blood pressure.

Raspberries are high in fibre too, and are 50% higher in antioxidants than strawberries, according to research in the Netherlands. Frozen fruit loses some of the Vitamin C, but the antioxidant properties will survive freezing.



Gooseberries and red and blackcurrants are the attraction for customers, often people with eastern Europe backgrounds, who can't find these berries in supermarkets. Then there are people who want to make their own preserves and buy fruit in bulk, and those who just love the trip to the bush at Sunny Creek.

TOP LEFT: RASPBERRIES PACKED FOR SALE.
TOP RIGHT: GOOSEBERRIES MAKE DELICIOUS PIES.

SANDFORD IS A VARIETY OF EARLY RASPBERRY



SAFE
QPV