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SOILLESS AUSTRALIA

Protected Cropping Australia Industry Trade Magazine

BerryQuest report

Latest on tomato potato psyllid in Vic

PCA 2025 Conference Preview

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Innovation, insight and impact on show in Tasmania

Master of Ceremonies Richard Shannon (NFF Horticulture Council) opening the conference. Photo: Huemen Media.

BerryQuest International 2025 (BQI25), held from February 24–27 in Hobart brought together the brightest minds and most passionate professionals in the Australian and global berry industry. Jane Richter reports.

Organised by Berries Australia, the four-day event attracted more than 540 delegates, 53 expert speakers and 65 exhibitors. There were 479 guests at the Driscoll's Gala Dinner, making it the largest gathering of the berry sector in Australia to date.

BQI25 opened with two farm tours – North and South – both fully booked that gave more than 300 attendees the opportunity to visit some of Tasmania's most innovative berry and orchard operations.

The Northern Tour, sponsored by Muirs and Cocogreen, started in Launceston and visited Driscoll's Nursery, Hillwood Berries, and Reid Fruits. Attendees learned about long cane propagation in raspberries and blackberries, the use of misted tips in strawberries, and explored leading technologies such as BerrySuite's real-time picker tracking software, Cocogreen's coir substrate, and the Burro autonomous transport robot. At Reid Fruits, visitors witnessed Cravo retractable roof systems, showcasing advanced climate control in premium cherry production.

The Southern Tour featured visits to Piñata Farms, R&R Smith, Willie Smith's, and Hansen Orchards. At Piñata's Orielton vast site, delegates toured packhouse facilities and learned about the cultivation of 'Sweet Eve' and 'Diamond Jubilee' berries. Lunch at Willie Smith's Apple Shed provided insights into successful agritourism, followed by orchard visits where participants explored organic apple production at R&R Smith and premium cherry and apple export systems at Hansen Orchards.

Conference highlights

The conference officially opened with a Welcome Reception sponsored by Mountain Blue and Perfection Fresh, set among the bustling Trade Show. This dynamic space showcased cutting-edge solutions in soilless growing, technology, irrigation, substrates, and packaging. Delegates explored innovations from 65 exhibitors, including Multisteps, FreshTrack, Haygrove, and TOMRA, reflecting the rapid pace of change in protected cropping and post-harvest systems.

Across two days, more than 50 speakers shared insights spanning agronomy, supply chain innovation, biosecurity, export growth,

Sitting down with Mike Knowles

UK-based Fruitnet Europe Managing Director, Mike Knowles, was a keynote speaker at BQI25 in February. Jonathan Eccles caught up with Mike in Hobart for this exclusive interview.

Jonathan Eccles You're here as a keynote speaker at BerryQuest International 2025 (BQI25). Can you outline your main focus of your presentation?

Mike Knowles I was looking at the statistics, trends in those data points for production, exports and imports of the key berry categories (strawberries, blueberries and what you call rubus, which are blackberries and raspberries). I was looking at where the growth has been, where the expansion of production has occurred, where the expansion of import demand has happened and then tried to extrapolate to see what kind of growth there could be. I went into some of the drivers behind the growth that we've seen to assess how strong they will be in future. Things like convenience and the health and super food status of berries. I gave an overview of structural things that are happening in the industry now, such as new varieties, better logistics, differences in packaging, which are at play creating a more valuable berry category.

JE What are some of the challenges for the berry industry?

MK Technology is one of the biggest and investing in the right technology to achieve sustainability, which is that big term people talk about.

JE The elephant in the room here in Australia has been sustainability especially around plastic and plastic waste from tunnels and even from punnets. Many businesses are trying to address the plastic punnet.

During your talk you put up figures comparing bananas, citrus, and berries that showed berries are going to start overtaking citrus in value terms of world trade.

ME Value terms – yes. There's a lot of investment in new and better varieties of berries although at some stage the competition between this variety, variety A and variety B, might not be so relevant. The danger is we end up with one product – as we have now in bananas. Berries are not necessarily seen as a staple, but consumers are beginning to plan to buy them and putting berries on their shopping lists, which is different from bananas.

Mike Knowles (Fruitnet Europe) shared his observations on the global berry industry at BerryQuest International 2025 in Hobart in February.

But for now, there's something about berries that makes them a bit more valuable in the mind of the consumer.

Bananas trade on small margins and ultimately are not that exciting, they're more 'I need to eat something' and that might be for breakfast or for a snack during the day. I don't think bananas quite have that same cache as berries.

JE Bananas make life possible, but berries make it worthwhile!

MK Absolutely, yeah, that's good.

JE Tell me more about your organisation, Fruitnet – some of your titles are celebrating anniversaries this year I believe.

MK Correct, *Asiafruit Magazine* has been charting developments in Asia now for more than three decades. And our first trade publication, *Fresh Produce Journal*, was launched 130 years ago, which makes it the produce industry's oldest trade publication.

We also have *Eurofruit Magazine*, which was created to talk about everything that was going on in the European market when the UK was joining the EU. And more recently we started *Produce Plus* for the Australia and New Zealand markets.

Those businesses all belong to the one company called Fruitnet. We also run a lot of conferences and events, and we partner with Fruit Logistica and help run Asia Fruit Logistica in Hong Kong. We're very active across lots of channels and of course we do a lot of online publishing.

JE So, what's your background?

MK I've been with Fruitnet 23 years this year. I started as a very, very junior journalist. Then I went to work for T*he Times* and soon I had an opportunity to use my languages. I joined Fruitnet in 2002. I am Managing Director, Fruitnet Europe and run all our European operations including publications and events. Also I am responsible for the media partnership we have with Fruit Logistica in Berlin. That's a very important partnership to us, because it gives us the chance to be very visible. But it also gives us the chance to prove our worth. We supply them with all their content stages – the speakers and the panel discussions at the show. And then we help them promote and disseminate that throughout the year. We've just launched a monthly podcast, based on people we have spoken to at the show.

Are you across cyber threats to your business?

Marcus van Heijst from Priva says cybercrime is a very real threat to growers, who should be aware of the different shapes and forms these threats can take and the importance of up-to-date equipment and staff training. Here's his 12-point checklist for checking your cybersecurity.

Cybersecurity is topical especially considering Australian producers both large and small have experienced serious incidents of cyberattacks. Although the integrity of local networks remains the responsibility of the property owners/operators, Priva takes many measures to ensure the integrity of its own networks, and the services provided to clients. In particular, the company protects its cloud services.

Broader risks

The risks for growers are much broader than just control system breaches. The following 12 points highlight the many risks that may be encountered (courtesy of AI).

The global horticultural industry faces a range of cybersecurity risks as it becomes more integrated with digital technologies and smart solutions. These risks are amplified by the increasing use of automation, Internet of Things (IoT) devices, e-commerce platforms, and cloud-based software in the sector. Below are some key cybersecurity risks the industry faces.

1. Data breaches and theft

- **Intellectual property theft** The horticultural industry, especially in plant breeding and genetic research, holds valuable intellectual property. Cyberattacks targeting this data can result in the theft of proprietary genetic information, research, and breeding techniques, leading to competitive disadvantages.
- **Customer data exposure** Businesses that manage online sales or digital services store sensitive customer data, including payment information, contact details, and personal preferences. A data breach can expose this information, leading to financial losses, legal liabilities, and reputational damage.

2. Ransomware attacks

- **Disruption of operations** Cybercriminals may deploy ransomware to lock down critical systems, such as farm management software, supply chain logistics, or e-commerce platforms. These attacks could cripple operations for days or even weeks, causing financial strain, crop loss, or production delays.
- **Demand for ransom** Attackers may demand a ransom payment in exchange for restoring access to systems or data, leaving businesses in a difficult situation if they don't have adequate backups or contingency plans.

3. Supply chain attacks

- **Vulnerabilities in vendor systems** The horticultural industry often relies on a global network of suppliers for equipment, fertilisers, seeds, and transportation services. If any of these third-party vendors fall victim to cyberattacks, it could disrupt the supply chain, cause delays, or result in compromised products reaching the market.
- **Interconnected Systems** Cybercriminals may target interconnected supply chain platforms, affecting multiple businesses simultaneously and potentially compromising sensitive data.

4. IoT and smart agriculture vulnerabilities

- **Insecure devices** Many horticultural operations rely on IoT (Internet of Things) devices to monitor climate, soil moisture, crop health, and other variables. If these devices are not properly secured, hackers can exploit vulnerabilities to disrupt operations, manipulate data, or cause damage to crops.
- **Remote access risks** As IoT devices and agricultural tools are often managed remotely, hackers may gain unauthorised access to these systems, taking control of automated processes such as irrigation or temperature regulation, potentially leading to crop damage or loss.

5. Phishing and social engineering attacks

- **Employee targeting** Cybercriminals may use phishing emails or social engineering tactics to trick employees into disclosing sensitive information, such as login credentials or financial details. These types of attacks are often difficult to detect and can lead to unauthorised access to internal systems or financial accounts.

Photos Adobe Stock Photos.

- **Business email compromise (BEC)** Hackers may impersonate company executives or suppliers to deceive employees into transferring funds or divulging confidential information, causing financial and reputational damage.

6. Attacks on farm management systems

- **Software vulnerabilities** Many modern horticultural operations rely on farm management software for tracking crops, managing inventory, and optimising resources. If these systems have unpatched security vulnerabilities, they can be exploited by attackers to corrupt or steal valuable data, disrupt operations, or manipulate financial records.
- **Data corruption or loss** Cyberattacks that target farm management software can lead to the corruption of critical data, such as crop yields, financial transactions, and labour schedules, which can result in poor decision-making and significant operational disruptions.

7. Malware and viruses

- **Infected devices and networks** Cybercriminals may infect systems with malware that spreads across the network, causing operational inefficiencies, data loss, or downtime. This is particularly risky when using shared devices or networks across different facilities (for example greenhouses, warehouses).
- **Disruption of automated systems** Malware can disable automated systems used for tasks such as irrigation or climate control, leading to crop damage or loss. In some cases, this malware can even be used for espionage, stealing critical agricultural data.

8. Denial of service (DoS) attacks

- **E-commerce disruptions** A Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attack could overwhelm the digital infrastructure of horticultural businesses, making their websites and e-commerce platforms unavailable for customers. This could lead to financial losses due to an inability to process orders.

Advancing yield forecasting in Australian protected cropping

Accurate short-term yield forecasting is vital for Australia's protected cropping industry reports Siddharth Jadhav, Founder and CEO Polybee.

Polybee, working with Flavorite and Spirli Strawberry Farms, is developing AI-driven data collection systems to refine predictions, helping growers optimise harvest and sales decisions.

Short-term yield forecasting (for example one day, three day and one week) is essential for the Australian protected cropping industry, as pricing negotiations and sales volumes with retailers depend entirely on its precision.

If forecasted volumes are overestimated, managers must compensate for the shortfall by sourcing additional produce through imports or local growers, or risk losing credibility with retailers.

Conversely, under-prediction leads to financial losses, as excess produce may sell at a lower price after harvest or, in the worst case, go to waste.

During the initial phase of the Hort Innovation Frontiers project, 'Growing horticulture through protected cropping innovation', Polybee worked closely with the Flavorite Group and Spirli Strawberry Farms to refine near-term yield estimation and day-before forecasts for tomato and strawberry crops.

This work establishes a strong foundation for achieving longer-term predictions, specifically three-day and seven-day forecasts. To accomplish this, Polybee has developed a robust data-driven approach encompassing data collection, data processing, and data presentation.

Watch the Polybee drones in action via video:

Matrice 3D conducting drone pollination while collecting data on adjacent row

https://youtu.be/Vs96bbs92To
Strawberry Tracking Video captured with drone: https://youtu.be/Pf18FXE3w8o

One of trial farms where Polybee is testing its drone technology.