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Australia may soon reap the rewards from a stonefruit operation built to the grandest



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Agrobrest territory sales manager Ian Winter (centre) Trevor Seckington. – Picture: BRAD COOPER.



by
**BRAD
COOPER**

A TIME-HONoured technique that may have been developed by the ancient Egyptians and taken up by Europeans during the Middle Ages to decorate castle courtyards is poised to revolutionise low-chill stonefruit production in Australia.

South of Bundaberg and in the historic district of Childers, leading-edge technology is combining with the traditional practice of espalier to bring 90,000 plum, peach and nectarine trees to full maturation and harvest by late 2010.

Welcome to what is arguably the world's biggest low-chill stonefruit farming enterprise, where espalier – the horticultural technique of training trees through pruning and grafting to create formal "two-dimensional" or single-plane patterns by the branches of the tree – is taking root in the district's rich volcanic red soil and flourishing in the mild climate.

If it all goes to plan, it will realise the dreams of a team of researchers and the ambitions of the farm's investment partners, who have prudently invested their funds through Rewards Group to see a long-standing niche in the market finally met, not only in Australia but also in the highly lucrative markets of South-East Asia.

The marketing plan is simple: fill Australia's super-market shelves with high-quality, top-tasting low-chill



castle

scale at Childers, south of Bundaberg.



discusses the crop's nutrient program with farm manager Darryle Hoffmann (left) and horticulturist

stonefruit from August to late November. Farm manager Darryle Hoffmann says this is the period when quality of fruit coming from the high-chill zones of southern Australia is often compromised in the rush to get product to market early.

"It's a tragedy for the whole industry if the first eating experience of stonefruit that consumers get for the season, especially heading into the peak buying time of Christmas, is dry, tasteless fruit," he said. "Our farm is going to change that perception and early indications from fruit that we've harvested so far and had tested by agents in Brisbane, strongly suggest that we're on track to deliver some of best tasting, premium-quality stonefruit to grace the Australian market."

While Australians enjoy the rewards, shoppers in South-East Asia may also have their pick of the fruit. During the August to November window, you are unlikely to find any stonefruit from anywhere in the world in these nearby overseas markets.

This is likely to change once the Childers farm is fully operational. Interest from buyers in Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore is apparently keen.

By the time every tree on the Rewards enterprise at Childers is ripe for picking, the farm will produce some 3000 tonnes of fruit a season.

But that is still another 18 months to two years

away. As Rewards Group horticulture manager Bill Hatton says, it is still a "work in progress", even if things are progressing nicely.

While proponents of the scheme talk up its potential, the ground work has been thoroughly prepared by a team of researchers and a long list of experienced specialists, who have put their ideas and concepts, developed over many years of trials, finally into practice.

Firm financial backing has also provided the funds to gear up the operation for the day when it ultimately swings into full production, a day that is just around the corner.

When that day comes, Mr Hatton estimates day-to-day operations will involve up to 250 workers, locally employed.

A handful of full-time staff and contractors are now finetuning the engine for the moment when they can open up the throttle and take off to where the skies really are the limit.

"If you're going to enter into low-chill stonefruit production, which isn't undertaken in many parts of the world, you have to be serious about what you're doing," Mr Hatton said.

No one is suggesting they're joking. Three pump-houses contain state-of-art computer-controlled irrigation systems supplied by Netafim.

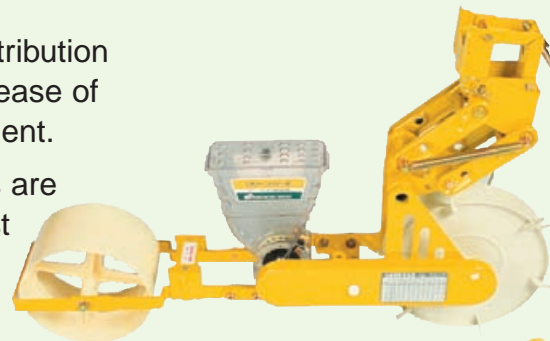
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All facets of the farm's crop management will be fully mechanised, as shown by foliar spraying of young trees.

● From previous page

Called Irrinet, the computerised system maintains water scheduling about 216,000 litres an hour for the whole operation at the touch of a keyboard or a mobile phone pad if the irrigation manager is off site.

Each tree has its own micro sprinkler, drawing on the farm's allocation supplied by SunWater from Paradise Dam and a back-up on-farm storage about 85 megalitres.

When every tree is planted and requires watering, the whole farm will use 1.5 megalitres a day.

Local supplier Adds Up Engineering has supplied the fertigation infrastructure. Mr Hatton calls the company's director, Tony Dent, something of a genius, responsible for designs that help to deliver liquid nutrients through the irrigation set-up with none of the problems often associated with such applications.

"It's like a giant mix-master," Mr Hatton said. "There's no blockages and it's hassle free. Adds Up Engineering has supplied us with a near flawless system. We deal with nothing but the best."

Under the ground, the nutrient systems supplied by Agrobest have impressed Mr Hoffmann and his senior horticulturist Trevor Seckington.

When they first planted on July 14, 2006, they did not expect a mature crop for three years.

In year one of planting they harvested six tonnes, which went to an independent agent for appraisal, all with positive feedback.

They expect next month they will harvest

on fertiliser and hoping for the best or there's the way the professionals do it," Mr Hoffmann said.

"We get soil tests done; we read the agronomist's report; we discuss it with our Agrobest consultant Ian Winter, who then advises us on the best product to use for our particular situation.

"We like Agrobest products because they've allowed us to reduce our chemical fertiliser use and instead use the beneficials in the soil to our best advantage."

Above the ground, the operation's grandest statement is perhaps the 12mm quad protective canopy supplied by NetPro.

Netting covers every centimetre of the orchard. At the moment that's 52 hectares, with another 38 hectares under construction.

By the time it is completed it will have taken NetPro, with a crew of contractors based in town, three years to complete.

While the obvious advantages include hail protection and security from birds, frost and other pests, the all over canopy provides an even micro-climate for the trees to thrive, Mr Hatton said.

"No matter what time of year, it maintains a fairly even temperature, which is also protected from high winds and the hot sun, preventing windmarking and russetting and contributing overall to the best quality fruit consumers' money will be able to buy," he said.

Espalier: it's French for success

ESPALIER was popular in the Middle Ages in Europe to produce fruit inside the walls of a typical castle courtyard without interfering with the open space, and to decorate solid walls by such trees planted near them.

Evidence suggests the technique dates back much further, perhaps even to ancient Egypt. The word 'espalier' initially referred to the trellis on which the plant was trained but over time has come to be used to describe the technique. An espalier collects almost as much sunlight as a regular tree, yet has far less mass. This makes them ideal not only for decorative purposes, but also for gardens in which space is limited.

In the orchards of the Rewards Childers farm, it has allowed for closer spacings, with rows five metres apart and trees two metres apart. Trimming, thinning, pruning, spraying and harvesting will be fully mechanised on the farm, and the espalier technique will help speed up the process, horticulture projects manager Bill Hatton says.



Above: Contractors work feverishly to install the remaining 38 hectares of protective canopy from Net Pro.

Right: The full extent of NetPro's protective canopy can be seen from the air. There is another 38 hectares of canopy currently under construction.



about 70 tonnes from 15,000 maturing trees to be marketed through Global Rewards.

The stunning growth of the trees is attributed to precise farm management, a near-perfect symphony of agronomic attention to detail.

"There's the old school way of chucking



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