

Taste of the wild spices up markets

A pepperberry producer is leading the increase in growing native Australian plants for food production in commercial operations.

Karolin MacGregor reports

They have been here for thousands of years and now some of Australia's oldest foods are being used to create new industries.

People are discovering just how tasty Australian native foods are and that is fuelling the development of new industries.

Among the native foods now being used is Tasmanian Mountain Pepperberry. Highly aromatic and with a unique peppery flavour, these berries are being harvested in the wild and grown commercially.

One of the growers is Andrew and Sharon Rath, who have set up a pepperberry farm on their property at Underwood.

They planted their first pepperberry trees about seven years ago and with extra plantings over the next couple of years, they will soon have about 5000 plants in the ground.

Getting the plants established is a slow process and they are grown from cuttings.

Mr Rath said the plants were in the on-farm nursery for about two years before being planted outside. After that, it takes another year or two before they produce enough berries to harvest.

While female plants produce the berries it is also vital to have sufficient male plants throughout the farm for good pollination.

Last week about 30 people visited the

farm to see how a successful native-foods business is run as part of a field day organised by Tamar NRM.

Mr Rath said there was a lot of genetic diversity in the wild pepperberry population so there is variation in how many berries are produced and how spicy they are, which makes wild harvesting more challenging.

"It varies a lot in the wild and it really depends on the season," Mr Rath said.

"We've got wild pepperberries at the back of our property and some years they are absolutely loaded with fruit and other years there are hardly any."

This variation is one of the main reasons Mr Rath said they decided to move into commercial production.

"We need to be able to supply our customers consistently with good quality berries and really the only way to be able to do that every year is to grow them in a more controlled environment," he said.

Because the industry is still so new, Mr Rath said a lot of what they are doing is trial and error. All of the plants are watered regularly through a drip system and fertilised as needed.

Mr Rath said over time they had identified the more productive plants and taken cuttings off them.

However, more work is needed to identify which genetics are going to be best suited to commercial production.



CONSISTENT CROPPERS: Andrew Rath produces pepperberry trees under controlled conditions in the nursery.

Mr Rath said the plants were very cold-tolerant but they did not cope well with dry conditions so irrigation is vital.

The farm uses weed matting to prevent possible issues with weed seeds during harvest.

Harvesting is about to start on the farm and will continue for about two months.

"One of the best things about them is they're really a lazy man's fruit because the trees don't drop their berries," Mr Rath said.

"That means we don't have to harvest them all in a particular time."

Harvesting is a delicate job and quite

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ANDREW RATH

labour intensive. After initially predicting mature trees would produce about 1kg of berries a year Mr Rath has been surprised to find the yield is now more than 2kg each.

Once picked the berries can be frozen and dried later as needed. The dried berries have a long shelf life.

The Raths dry their berries on site with either conventional hot-air drying or using a recently bought freeze drier.

Currently most of their berries are sold through online orders. About half are sold into Europe, while 25 per cent go to the United States and the rest are sold into the domestic market.



nursery at the Underwood farm.

Pictures: CHRIS KIDD

Mr Rath said the potential market for pepperberries was significant. "It's huge," he said. "America is a big potential market and we haven't even touched Asia yet."

Mr Rath said to make the most of these opportunities said it was essential the industry continued to expand. Pepperberries are one of 14 native food that were identified as having the potential for commercial production. Australian Native Food and Botanicals director Marianne Stewart attended last week's field day and said the industry had been bubbling along, with peaks in the food side of things.

"But in the last 10 years these has been quite a lot of research done on about 14 species that were highlighted as being potentially commercial, because there are about 6500 species out there. It's been identified that of those 14 species, most of them are really high in antioxidants."

Ms Stewart said as a result of the research there was interest in the pharmaceutical benefits of these plants, including pepperberries which have high levels of antioxidants. "We've got a very valuable resource in Australia we haven't recognised. "And now people are starting to look

and say, well I wonder what else is out there."

Lemon Myrtle leaf is one of the biggest native plant industries if macadamias are excluded. However Ms Stewart said as Australians' palates developed and chefs became more adventurous, native foods were starting to be more commonly used. "I just know in the last 10 years since I've become involved people are really starting to embrace them," she said. "But they need to know how to work with them because they can be a bit tricky."



EXPERIMENTING: Bronzewing farm owner Andrew Rath with his pepperberries at the Underwood farm. Below, pepperberry products; a farm tour was part of at the recent field day on the farm focusing on native foods.

