

MEET THE MAKER

Helpers are worth their weight in blueberries

FOR this month's chapter of Meet The Maker, Southerly Magazine travelled to Youngs Siding to speak to Eden Gate Blueberry growers Andre Roy and Amanda Noack.

Southerly Magazine: Andre, let's deal with your accent straight up. There are hints of Canada, the US and maybe Europe. Where is all that from?

Andre Roy: I was born in Canada, on the Quebec side, and when I was younger they were talking about separation and losing identity. I felt I was American so I moved to the US and lived there for 22 years in Houston. I've lived and worked in maybe 45 or 50 countries. I'm a pilot and used to fly for airborne geophysics and oil exploration. I met Amanda when I was doing a job in the Copper River Valley in 1992.

Amanda Noack: I grew up in the Perth Hills, trained in Agricultural Technology at Muresk a long time ago, worked in Perth, Kununurra and Wongan Hills for Ag Dept, then when I needed a job after a trip to the UK, found one as a point-picker in the early days of airborne geophysics when surveys were flown from mosaiced aerial photography. Data was processed with basic equipment on site and while Andre travelled the world working mainly in places you wouldn't want to visit, I travelled to a lot of places in the West Australian back-of-beyond.

SM: How did you discover this part of the world?

AN: I came to visit my mum, because she and her partner had retired down here. When he put me on the bus he said I should look for a business while I was here.

AR: She found two



businesses. We picked this one. The other was a hotel in town. The lesson we learned from running a hotel in Port Douglas was never to do it again.

SM: What was here at the time?

AN: Similar to what you see now. It was established in 1983. When it was planted it was only really designed for a ride-on mower, not for any larger equipment, so it's a bit limiting to what you can do, but we solved the mowing problem.

AR: Oh yeah, the guinea pigs. But we'll come back to that.

SM: What is the annual cycle of a blueberry plant and what do you have to do with them?

AN: They're fairly easy, they like acid soil, plenty of water, good drainage, light on any fertiliser. They flower and ripen in spring. They're easy to pick, but they do get picked one by one and don't ripen in a bunch like a grape. They ripen individually, so you'll pick the same bush half a dozen times. It's fairly labour intensive. They might start fruiting in November and go through to February or March, depending on the weather. A brief hot season means it's a short season.

AR: Last year we were late. We brought our first berries to the market in mid-December. The year before we brought them at the end of October, but everything was a month late last year.

SM: How is this season shaping?

AN: It seems to be earlier this year, but we'll see.

SM: What does that harvest period look like? You go back and do the same bush again and again?



■ Amanda Noack and Andre Roy get weed management from an unlikely source at Eden Gate Blueberries.

AN: We'll have three or four or five pickers, picking Monday to Friday. We sell a lot at the Farmers Market, and the farm here is open to the public from December to February. We do a lot of our own products too. We do our own preserves, ice cream and muffins on a daily basis.

AR: We also grow micro greens. We supply most of the top restaurants in town.

SM: What sort of yield comes off your hectare?

AR: Five to 10 tonnes, depending on the year.

SM: Do you irrigate?

AN: Yes, it's all kept going with irrigation to maintain a level of consistency. They'd be dead if you didn't.



AN: Backpackers and locals provide our workforce, depending on who's interested and willing. We've got some really good locals that come back every year.

SM: Is the blueberry an azalea?

AN: It's related. They say that if you want a food garden you should rip out your azaleas and replace them with blueberries, because they have beautiful autumn colours.

SM: So when harvest is done, what annual work is required on the bushes?

AR: Pruning. I've done hard pruning before and it wasn't very good. You can take off 50 per cent, pruning out old wood and encouraging new growth all the time. We've got 15 different types, so some bushes start earlier, and some bushes start later, so that's where we can extend the season. There are some quite old-fashioned varieties which you won't see elsewhere. We've got self-pollinating and cross-pollinating varieties so that way we get the longer season, because the self-pollinators will go from the beginning to the end, whereas the cross-pollinators will only be about six weeks.

SM: If you were writing tasting notes for your blueberry liqueur, how would you describe it?

AR: Delicious. I tell everybody, if you drink this bottle, you're going to feel really, really good.

SM: It's medicinal?

AR: Yes, it's medicinal. This year, this batch is the best we've ever done.

SM: Who makes it for you?

AR: Mick at Wignalls. He's also a chemist, so he knows his stuff. We used to have it made in Margaret River.

SM: When did the micro-greens come onto the scene?

AN: The people from Mt Barker who owned it were packing up and moving to Tasmania, and I thought that some of their equipment might be useful for propagating blueberries. We've never got around to doing anything else except micro-greens with it, and we've put in another couple of tunnels as well. We were shipping them to Perth early on, but freight's the killer, so there's no point. So we just sell them locally.

SM: What varieties do you grow?

AN: Probably about 20 different varieties of Asian greens, herbs, radishes, things like that. We can grow just about anything but it depends if there's a demand for it.

SM: Any plans to diversify further?

AN: I'd say our plans would be to make better use or more use of what we've got.

SM: How do you do that?

AN: Mainly with value-adding. We're now doing pestos with the over-grown micro-greens. Plus we've got a few interesting fruit trees.

SM: How do you approach

SM: Where does the market competition come from?

AN: They've come from the Eastern States, but they did have Perth ones a couple of weeks ago.

AR: At the biggest farm in Australia they've got over 2 million plants and machine harvest and have their own employees being paid the minimum wage. We can't afford that so our people power is backpackers.



■ Micro-greens are an important segment of the Eden Gate product list.

weed and pest management?

AN: We got two guinea pigs a few years ago. They just move a little bit each day, they don't dig, they don't climb and they're just interested in grass. They eventually went out and got eaten by something, so we got another dozen at various stages and then a few more. Last count I did the other day of ones I could see was 70.

SM: So they're your mowers?

AN: They haven't done the last two rows, but they've done a really good job of cleaning up all the grasses and reeds. Plus we have four ducks for the slugs and snails.

SM: Were you using much herbicide before?

AN: Yes, but much less now. We don't spray any pesticides and never have. The farm is netted to protect the blueberries from birds. We have used Lycophyte in the past and paid people to pull weeds, but the guinea pigs are now doing a wonderful job of weeding. We used to use conventional fertilisers but have exclusively

used Australian Mineral Fertiliser for several years. The farm has an electric fence which is designed to keep diggers and burrowers and foxes out. Our blueberries and other fruits are spray-free – not organic but pretty damn close.

SM: Given one choice of one of your own products, what would you have?

AN: Just fresh blueberries.

AR: I'd have the liqueur. And blueberries.

SM: You two clearly enjoy the lifestyle out here, but have you ever thought of moving on?

AN: Andre would say he loves what he does and he loves where he lives, so why would he go anywhere else?

AR: Well, it's the best place I've lived and worked on the planet. **S**

