

## **Blueberries in Australia**

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Blueberries were introduced into Victoria in the 1950's and 1960's but attempts to establish a commercial enterprise were hindered by virus problems. The crop is considered to have potential for the domestic market both for fresh consumption and processing, and for export to the U.S., Japan and Europe during their "off seasons" as a fresh fruit.

In 1970 seeds of blueberry breeding lines were introduced into Victoria from Dr. Stanley Johnson in Michigan. From approximately 5,000 seedlings raised, 15 were selected showing most promise, and these became the Knoxfield series, Bell (1979). Plants were selected for yield, berry size and flavour, colour, harvest date, plant vigour, berry keeping quality, and suitability to mechanical harvesting.

Some Rabbiteye varieties are being introduced because of their extended climatic range and tolerance to disease and drought. The N.S.W. Department of Agriculture has also introduced two low chill tetraploids which appear to have a lot of promise.

Virus status is now an important consideration in blueberry introductions. Few U.S. varieties have been indexed for release making the location of virus free material difficult. Plants already introduced privately and by various departments are being watched closely for virus. Fortunately there are no known viruses in Rabbiteye blueberries.

Yields of 5 to 6 kg on 4-year-old bushes have been recorded, Bell (1979). Berry size, yield and flavour of the Knoxfield varieties have rated favourably with fruit of the U.S. varieties seen to date. Mulching trials have shown black polythene to be superior to pinebark, sawdust, sod culture or clean cultivation in establishing young plants. Diuron, Dichlobenil, Terbacil and Simazine were found to be the safest weedicides. Nitrogen and pH trials have shown that ammonium-N is preferred to nitrate-N and that blueberries grow best at pH 4.5 to 4.8, Bell (1978).

Research to date has indicated that high quality blueberries can be grown in Victoria economically and successfully, Bell and Kroon (1979). Further research work must include the introduction and assessment of improved varieties for specific situations, such as low chill requirements and resistance to Phytophthora root rots. Research into soil types, nutrition and climatic suitability will be important in the development of this promising new industry.

Bell, R.W. (1978). Studies into the Establishment of a Blueberry Industry in Victoria - Phase I Training Report.

Bell, R.W. and Kroon, K.H. (1979). The Blueberry - Vict. Dept. of Agric. Crops Advisory Leaflet.

Bell, R.W. (1979). Blueberry Planting Material, 1979-80 Leaflet.