

Hot insights on cool climate native pepper

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Tasmanian mountain pepper (*Tasmannia lanceolata*), pepper berries, or simply native pepper, is a small tree that grows naturally in the cool, wet mountains of Southern NSW, Victoria and Tasmania.

Both the dried pepper berries and the leaves can be used for a range of culinary purposes. The pepper can be used simply as a substitute for regular black pepper, but mountain pepper has a unique spicy aroma and a range of volatiles that provide a very different taste which demands to be used as a primary ingredient, not as a substitute.

There are commercial pepper berry sauces and salad dressings, mountain pepper coated macadamias, lavosh and bread sticks. Many Australian gins have mountain pepper as one of the botanicals.

In the world of spices, mountain pepper is pretty much unknown, and much of the reason for this is that the amount of the pepper berry available is very small (around 4-6 tonnes of dried berries per year).

Small volumes limit market expansion both in Australia and around the world. At present the market is concentrated in Western Europe (particularly Germany) and Australia, but smaller volumes are being sold in the USA and Canada.

Variable yields and variable quality

A significant limitation to expanding mountain pepper markets is that the 'crop' is mostly wild collected (up to 95 per cent coming from the bush).

Bush collection has many issues but two in particular stand in the way of market development.

Firstly, like any wild food, there is a huge genetic diversity among the trees.

This results in dramatic differences in the spiciness of the pepper from tree to tree and from region to region. This lack of consistency has led some customers to complain that they have to test every batch of wild-harvested pepper berries in order to determine the appropriate amount to use in their products.

Secondly, the 'bush crop' fails.

Biennial bearing is a major problem with high yielding years often followed by years with little to no fruit. We estimate that the bush crop fails two years in every five. This makes it difficult for end-processors to develop their products when next year they may not be able to obtain mountain pepper.



Mountain pepper trees are pruned to maintain a maximum height of two metres. Weedmatting, drip irrigation and bird netting are essential to maximise yields and quality.

Agricultural Production

At Bronzewing Farm, we have tried to overcome the limits of the bush crop by bringing the plant into agricultural production.

Our selected cultivars are consistently high in spiciness ensuring we can supply pepper berries of the same quality, but differ in flowering dates and growth habits.

Our oldest plants are now eight-years-old and 1.8m tall, yielding 2.5kg of fresh berries/year (approximately 600g of dried peppercorns). 2.5kg may not sound like a lot, but this equates to over 12,000 berries/plant (all picked by hand).

Further plantings this year will increase our plantings to 5000 female trees and 500 male trees. Peak production will occur in 2023.

The number one requirement for successful growing of Tasmanian mountain pepper is water.

In fact, our production will only be limited to 5000 female plants, not because of available land, but because of available water for summer irrigation. The primitive vascular system of mountain pepper means that it can struggle in the heat.

Growers of other tree fruit may laugh when I talk about Tasmanian heat (Bronzewing Farm has an average of



Tasmanian mountain pepper berries ready for harvest on Bronzewing Farm.

only six days a year above 30C), but even at these 'low' temperatures we typically irrigate 1.5 L/plant every second day from January to February.

Would they thrive in Mildura-type temperatures if they had sufficient water? Possibly, but perhaps they are called 'mountain' pepper for a reason.



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