

Hilton's abundant blueberry and gooseberry fields forever

By Carol Posthumus - Photographs supplied by BerryGrow SA

We recently went on an inspiring and informative whistle-stop irrigation tour of KwaZulu-Natal with Agriplas, a SABI Company Member and one of the leading suppliers of irrigation equipment and water management solutions. Our thanks to the Agriplas team of Sanette Carrick and Nick von Bargaen as well all the terrific KwaZulu-Natal farmers and their teams for giving us excellent insights into what is happening in the farming arenas of KwaZulu-Natal. It was enlightening to experience what an irrigation adviser's occupation involves on a day-to-day basis – usually media travel with marketing crews, so to accompany a technical team is interesting. It is a privilege to visit so many beautiful farms in South Africa in a day's work.

I must just say the on-road and off-road driving skills of the SABI members like Nick are excellent – it takes some doing concentrating on driving the incredibly hilly farm roads in a 4X4 while keeping up a constant good-natured chat on the mobile to customers giving in-depth and friendly technical advice and support about drip, filters, emitters, sprinklers, pumps, electronic systems and much more with customers! Utmost respect.

Before embarking on our KwaZulu-Natal tour from Cape Town we were of course aware the sugar cane industry, for long so definitive of KZN, is going through change. These days even the Uber drivers in Durban keep up a steady commentary about how the sugar cane fields are a-changing and making way for new developments.

The BFAP Baseline (2019-2028) puts it like this: "The South African sugar industry is in a deep crisis. Tariff-free imports from mainly Eswatini, together with the wider imposition of the Health Promotions Levy (HPL) has had a major impact on local production and market demand and has reduced sugar industry revenue by approximately R1.5 billion."

"In total, more than 70 000 hectares of sugar-cane have been lost over the past decade and

due to the dwindling profit margins over the last number of years, the trend of farmers moving away from sugarcane and diversifying into other long-term crops (macadamias, avocados, citrus etc) is continuing at a rapid rate. These farmers will not switch back to cane, as establishment of these high value crops is extremely capital intensive. Under the 2019 Baseline projections, given implemented current protection allowance levels, a further 17 000 ha will be lost over the next decade."





The KwaZulu-Natal agricultural landscape is transforming fast and the area, from what we observed, could subsequently emerge as a new powerhouse for high-value blueberry, berries in general and macadamia farms.

South Africa's blueberry industry grew from a mere R15,5 million in 2008 to R1,25 billion in 2018 – the growth is, in any one's books, exponential – the local and export markets' appetite for healthy superfoods like blueberries and macadamias just increases, it appears. The talented farmers of KwaZulu-Natal are clearly not letting the grass grow under their feet as far as berries and macadamia cultivation go. There are other crops being grown, naturally. We also visited a lovely granadilla plantation (more on this in next edition), which is supplying a lot of granadillas (passion fruit) to Milan and the EU. There were also some sylvan areas of tea tree oil plant cultivation in this province.

Hilton blueberries & gooseberries

First stop on our trip was a visit to Mount Verde Estate to BerryGrow SA's farming enterprise.



This farm is located in verdantly pretty Hilton. Hilton is the home of the well-known school, also called Hilton, famed for schooling South African legends like Bobby Skinstad and Gary Teichmann to name a few on the bounteous Mount Verde, a lifestyle farming security estate consisting of 56 farms situated across 2500 hectares.

Apparently, a famous South African musician – in the style of the Beatles, Queen and many other musos throughout the ages – has a farm complete with a recording studio here at Mount Verde.

Within this farming estate, there are a variety of crops - cattle, proteas and, of course,

BerryGrow SA's undercover and open field blueberry and gooseberry fields.

BerryGrows' team have such immense enthusiasm and drive. Their excitement, dedication and general positivity is infectious. These are modern farmers, to the zenith. Though they are hectically busy, Warren Haviside (Owner) and Vincent Davis (Packhouse Manager) don't mind showing us around.

Warren tells us that the development, at the time of our visit, was a mere nine months' old. We are incredulous at how much they have developed and built (a lot of earth moving machinery work and heavy duty ploughing and preparing has been done, before the ploughing, planting and building) in a matter of months. Vincent, who has a background in marketing, comments that it's been a great lifestyle change, as he relocated from Johannesburg to join the family enterprise – swapping the sleek city shoes of Sandton for the muddy Wellies of Hilton and is loving it!



The venture was started by Gary Pedlar, and Warren Haviside, who

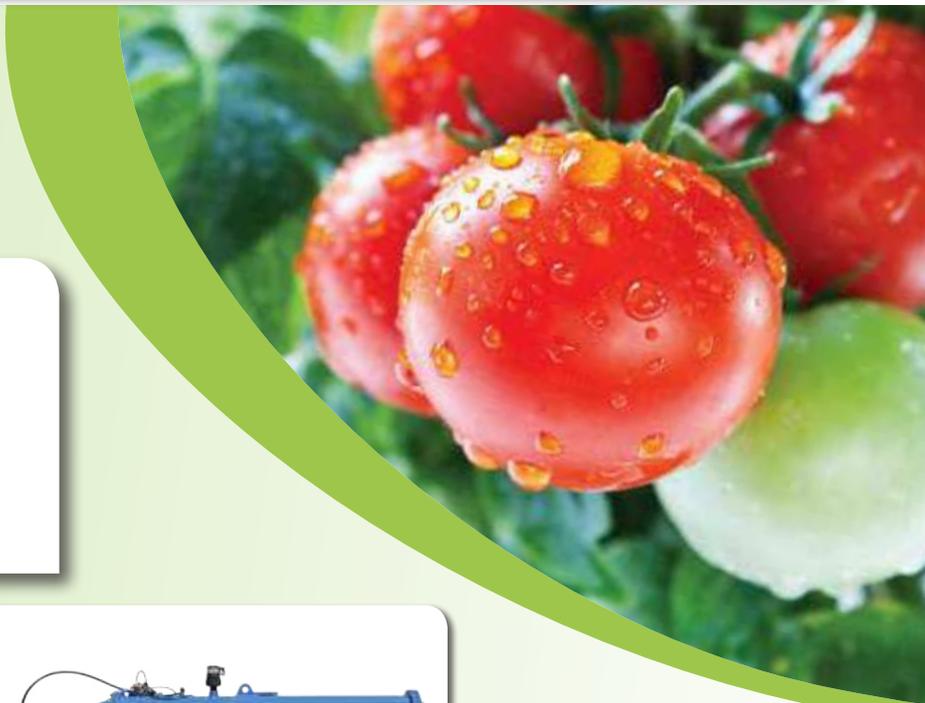


Warren and Vincent





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are the owners of BerryGrow. Gary is Warren's uncle and together they have brought their vision into reality. Warren is quick to mention that none of this would have been possible without Gary's hugely knowledgeable farming experience and input.

To meet the demands of the export and local market, BerryGrow has planted 70 000 blueberry shrubs and 30 000 gooseberry shrubs. This farm was previously a sugar cane and wattle farm – and with the berries (16ha for blueberries and 7ha to gooseberries), these farmers are truly breaking new ground.

Water saving, bees

The farm is utilising the best water saving and optimum irrigation

equipment, and are making use of imported peat and mulch on their crops. The peat has great water retention and water saving qualities, says Warren. They are fortunate in that water quality here is excellent. For sustainability and growth, BerryGrow are installing approximately 50 beehives this year on the farm and will ramp that up to about 160 hives over the next four years.

The farm is using the Agriplas range, and SABI member Rob Pottow's firm – Rob Pottow Irrigation - is the irrigation supplier here. BerryGrow, for their blueberries, are using pressure compensated dripper line Vardit – (Pressure compensating dripper with expanded inlet filter, uniform flow-rate, suitable for different water sources) or Vered (Flat

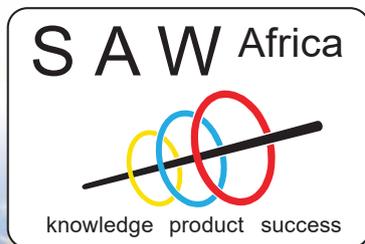
heavy-duty Pressure compensating dripper with unique and accurate pressure compensating labyrinth mechanism) with a 0,3m spacing and a 3.5 l/hour delivery. They are utilising short pulse irrigation cycles of 15 minutes twice daily, one of which consists of fertigation. Dosetec pumps and Gulf Hydraulic valves are part of this ultra-modern system.

The gooseberry fields are thriving on the slopes of a hill – very steep slopes they are too. The crop is flourishing, using Agriplas' pressure compensating dripper line (0,3m spacing and 3.5l/hour delivery). Warren told us that gooseberries actually grow wild in this area. It was on this premise that they decided to plant the crop, to help generate immediate cash flow. They took a calculated risk

when planting them on such steep slopes with drip lines says Vincent – this definitely was a good idea, as, at the time of writing a few months later, BerryGrow was harvesting fabulous looking juicy gooseberries and shipping the berries to retailers nationwide.

Perhaps by the time you read this article you will have purchased some deliciously healthy BerryGrow berries from your local store, whether you are locally based or in London or Dubai!

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Or contact Warren on
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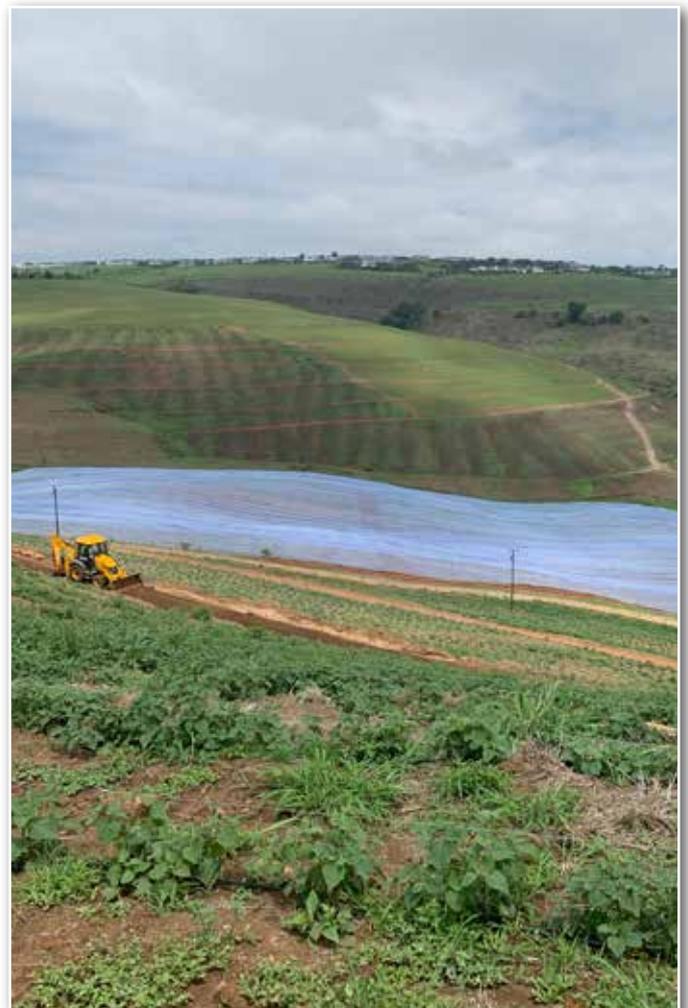
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Growing blueberries and much more

The irrigation and SABI community is filled with wonderful people. The irrigation community tend to be technical in outlook, often creative, innovative, entrepreneurial, water loving, passionate water savers (of course) and plant and nature enthusiasts. Some SABI members have terrific gardens – ICID President and SABI Treasurer-Secretary Felix Reinders, for instance, has a greenhouse with amazing orchids at home. This used to be Felix’s children’s garages for their cars, which he converted into a hothouse once the young generation took flight.

Technical Advisor for Agriplas in KZN Nick von Bargen and his wife Maryna and their delightful daughter enjoy growing and cultivating a variety of plants in their garden at home in Durban. They have prolific avocado and banana trees – they resort to giving away avos and bananas

every season, as they simply just cannot keep up eating the fruits. Nick and Maryna graciously showed Sanette and I their garden, a sub-tropical patch of paradise.

Engineer Nick is clearly brilliant with all things mechanical and

electrical and restores vintage Jaguars vehicles to their former glory (maybe better). Maryna is a grower, she has very green fingers, and can urge just about anything to shoot up from seed. Maryna has a batch of blueberries that are going to a farmer, which she has grown from seed. “Once I started growing from seed, I just couldn’t stop,” says Maryna, who cultivates everything from tomatoes to lemons, elderberry to blueberry, dragon fruit and much more. Maryna sees the possibilities in all seeds and her flourishing garden is indeed a tribute to this.

Thank you, Nick and Maryna, for showing us around and your hospitality!

