

Chinese visitors explores local passionfruit

Story by Lesley Board

Will New Zealand passionfruit growers pass their expertise on to the Chinese and if so, will it threaten their own export market?

Keith Sandom, president of the New Zealand Passionfruit Growers Association, who hosted Xulan Hu, a Chinese Professor in Horticulture, in Katikati last month, does not see China as a threat to the local industry.

“For one thing they grow their fruit in our off season. Also we are fortunate in that the US will buy as much fruit as New Zealand can produce. If we had a really big supply of passionfruit

Xulan Hu and Keith Sandom with Linda Dimmock on her Katikati passionfruit orchard. Photo by Lesley Board





then perhaps we might look to sell in SE Asia, but after talking with Xulan and seeing slides of his region, I don't think they have the infrastructure to be a potential threat."

Professor Hu spent a week in New Zealand after first visiting Australia. There he was keen to investigate blueberry growing at Coff's Harbour and potato growing in Ballarat. In New Zealand his main interest was in passionfruit and kiwifruit but he also wanted to look at crops such as blueberries, nashi, feijoas, vegetables and cut flowers. He was not interested in avocados saying the flavour did not appeal to Chinese who preferred a sweet taste.

Xulan retired two years ago from the Yunnan Provincial Department of Agriculture; this trip was funded by local government. He was here to learn how New Zealand and Australia grow certain crops, but also to look at opportunities for co-operation in areas such as research and marketing.

"For instance we grow Hayward kiwifruit well in our area and we have a long border with Laos and Vietnam. Perhaps there is potential to work with Zespri in selling fruit into SE Asia during New Zealand's off season."

Xulan described Yunnan province, which is mostly subtropical highlands, as 'The Kingdom of Plants' and the source of half the native plant species in China. It is home to 44 million people.

"We are regarded as a very special area within China. The average altitude is 2000m above sea level though we also have a deep river valley where it is hot enough to grow tropical fruit such as bananas, pineapples and mangoes. The soil is deep red clay and easy to cultivate. Average winter temperatures range from 5-20 degrees and it never goes above 30 degrees in summer."

Fruit has been grown in Yunnan for many years but cut flowers arrived as a commercial proposition less than 20 years ago. Yunnan now supplies around 50 percent of China's cut flowers, mostly roses, carnations and lilies and they are exported to Japan, Hong Kong, SE Asia and Australia. Here he was particularly interested in calla lilies and Sandersonia.

"For years the growing of flowers was not allowed in Yunnan. They were seen as a capitalist venture as opposed to growing food, but one vegetable grower branched out into flowers during the 1980's and now they are a major industry."

Xulan said 70 percent of Yunnan's population were small-scale farmers, a typical holding being just half an acre - 2 acres with no machinery used. The major city of Kunming with its 3 million people provided a ready local market.

"I am very impressed at the way you grow and market your New Zealand passionfruit. The fruit is better than any I have



Fruit grading in China.

seen, including that grown in the United States. At home we have grown a yellow variety of passionfruit on post and wire fences for 12 years but only for processing into juice which is mainly sold to Europe. Now we want to look at producing fresh passionfruit with some technical advice from New Zealand. As our population becomes wealthier, people are more willing to spend money on different foods."

Xulan was interested in the support structures used by New Zealand passionfruit growers and also surprised to see Nashi pears grown on pergola in Katikati. In Yunnan the nashi are grown as trees that are pruned to control the height and the fruit are smaller.

Yunnan is China's major passionfruit growing region because, unlike other areas, the province is not subject to damaging typhoons. They already grow the fruit on 3000ha for processing while New Zealand has just 70-80ha in passionfruit.

"I want to try and help local government or a private company to grow fresh passionfruit at home. Hopefully we can find ways to co-operate with the industry here and in Australia, perhaps importing seeds or plants. In the same way we would like to involve a New Zealand kiwifruit company in the growing and marketing of our own kiwifruit, developing it into a major industry."

While in New Zealand Xulan also met with representatives of Zespri and of the cut flower industry. 🌿