

Vigour and passion

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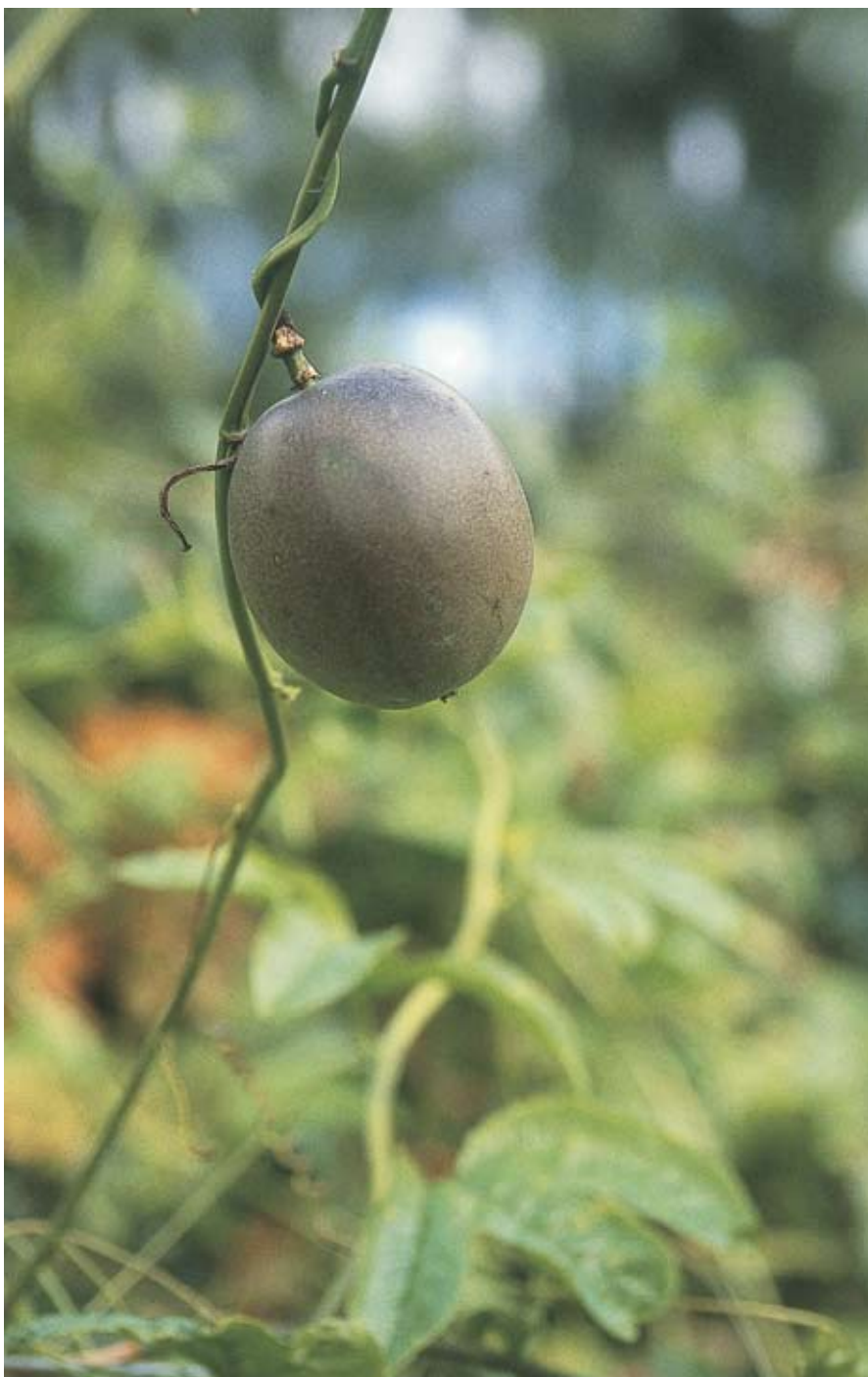
A well attended AGM in Whangarei is indicative of the state of vigour in the small and dynamic passionfruit industry. With just 22,000 trays exported and a strong niche local market, demand exceeds supply and the industry is facing growth and production issues.

Although most passionfruit growers are in Bay of Plenty, some large newer orchards are being planted in Northland. So the choice of Whangarei as the venue for the two day AGM enabled growers to see some of the recent activity.

USA is the predominant export market for passionfruit and New Zealand fruit is sought after because it is clean and has a good strong flavour. Bruce Mulligan who exports exotics – passionfruit, tamarillos, and feijoas – exclusively to Frieda's in California, says passionfruit has the advantage of being already well known and consumed in US, and the fruit is light so freight costs are low. Bruce – “The US market has given constant returns in recent years but now fuel and our strong dollar are issues that may affect the mix. The strong local market is a good buffer that is low risk with no currency fluctuation.” 2005 has been an interesting season according to Daniel Dear, Export Product Manager for Intermax. The climate meant the season was late starting with a condensed volume of fruit from the end of February to March compared with the more usual January start. And the drought this season meant more skin wrinkling sooner. Daniel – “USA is excited about small exotic fruit and this market has seen double digit growth in the last couple of years. Our main passionfruit market is California but we also sell into New York, Boston, Washington, and Florida.”

Californians are increasing passionfruit plantings and are growing in different areas to supply fruit at different times of the year beginning in July. Daniel – “Both California and Florida have extended their own growing window to 10 months which benefits everyone

because it keeps passionfruit in people's awareness most of the year. There's room for more volume of passionfruit into US chain stores, and we need more consumer education on 'ripe when wrinkled' and more recipes on interesting passionfruit temptations.”



Fruit on the Bloxwith orchard near Whangarei.



A passionfruit block on Mark Bloxwith's orchard near Whangarei.

The reliance on the US as the main export market concerns some passionfruit growers and Daniel discussed some other options. “There’s potential to increase exports to both Australia and Japan. We’ve put a couple of shipments into Australia but it’s a spot market because they grow their own. Japan has good long term potential but it is inconsistent and is a very small market at the moment. South East Asian markets like Korea, Thailand, Hong Kong, and Singapore are limited because they are heavily supplied with their own exotics at our market production time. Both UK and Europe are inconsistent and we would be pushed to supply volume. So building and expanding on existing US markets makes the most sense, underpinned with expanding the local market.”

As procurement manager for MG Marketing, Barry Thornton is familiar with the place of passionfruit on the local market. “Passionfruit have a unique place on the market. Part of why they command big money is that restaurants committed to passionfruit toppings etc on their menus have to have it. They may not need much but they do need it – so sometimes passionfruit will get \$24 a kilo on the local market. Promotions too are possible by negotiation with

supermarkets but they need to be sure of the volume to back up the promotion.”

Barry and Daniel both point out that grading standards need to be more consistent to better serve the local market. Daniel – “The time spent grading fruit and on presentation is the best investment you can make. The approved supplier programme is now required for fruit entry into Progressive supermarkets but not yet for Foodstuffs. There’s a premium of \$1 a kilo for approved suppliers.”

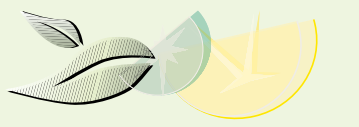
As growers seek to meet the market, there are also production issues that are being addressed. Copper is sprayed frequently on passionfruit crops to keep bacterial grease spot under control. With increasing knowledge on taking care of soil life, continued use of copper is now known to pose a threat to soil health and fertility so the industry is keen to investigate viable alternatives. An AGM vote to increase the grower levy from 1.25% to 2% will allow some research work to be undertaken to better understand diseases and thereby look at other solutions.

Bob Fullerton and Pia Rheinlander from HortResearch in Auckland presented knowledge to date on passionfruit diseases and posed questions

for future strategies that may include less dense canopy management, orchard hygiene, and crop scheduling. In addition to levies, some NZFF Charitable Trust and MAF Sustainable Farming Trust funding may be available to assist with an industry research programme.

Two other research projects have had unexpected outcomes. Banana passionfruit have become an invasive weed in forests and parks throughout New Zealand so Landcare has been researching two bio-control methods. The several banana passionfruit *Passiflora* species are related to, but different from, the *Passiflora edulis* species. Any control methods therefore primarily need to be safe for the horticultural *Passiflora edulis*, and for the native *Passiflora tetrandra*.

Two bio-control methods were considered by researchers working with Landcare Research. Dr Nicholas Waipara, microbiologist at University of Auckland, was investigating use of a fungal disease *Septoria* introduced from Colombia to successfully bio-control the banana passionfruit weed invasion in Hawaii. The fungus however, proved to also affect *Passiflora edulis* so work has been discontinued. And Hugh Gourlay, an entomologist with Landcare Christchurch, has been working with Colombians to research introducing a



moth species into New Zealand that feeds on banana passionfruit in its homeland of South America. The moth though has so far failed to make it into quarantine.

Keith Sandom, president of the New Zealand Passionfruit Growers Association, says the industry is at an interesting stage in its evolution. "Smaller hobby growers from the past are pulling out, and those coming into the industry now are in it on a larger more professional scale. With them they bring different skill bases in from other industries. They are aware that passionfruit is a small profitable crop and that both domestic and international issues need addressing to ensure it stays that way. There's the juggle too between keeping production small enough to retain the exotic niche and price, and keeping communication open and dynamic. And we have enough challenging issues to keep us on our toes."

While passionfruit growers were in the North, they took the opportunity to visit some passionfruit orchards near Whangarei, one of which is being developed by Mark Bloxwich and was featured in the *Orchardist* Magazine a year ago.

Mark has subsequently bought the bare-land block next door and is about to expand his passionfruit project there to double his present canopy area. He will then have a total of 11 hectares of passionfruit including a block at Ruatangata that he planted in December last year. Most of his home block plants are now two years old.

Mark knew nothing about passionfruit when he began, but the uppermost single thing he has learnt is that they are vigorous growers. His plants had their first commercial crop this season. "They began in March and produced flat out for three and a half months, then it was over. The long hot summer compressed



Passionfruit growers enjoying the field day at the Bloxwich orchard.

the season – and necessitated irrigation to prevent heaps of smalls."

Dense canopy meant Mark lost fruit to rot so he has just given some blocks their first intense prune. Prunings will be pushed out of the blocks and burnt to prevent re-infestation by fungal rot spores.

Mark has also learned that with the scale of production he will be looking

at, he wants to pack his own fruit so he can control quality and timing. And with ten metres of free draining volcanic soil on his and surrounding land, neighbours are starting to get curious, so he may have others to pack for.

For further information, please refer to the website <http://www.passionfruit.org.nz>