A man with a grey beard and a purple cap with 'crt' on it is kneeling in a field of blackcurrant plants. He is holding two small branches of the plants in his hands. The field is filled with rows of similar plants, and a line of trees is visible in the background under a clear sky.

Bill Jermyn with Blackadder, a relatively new early variety with excellent flavour. These plants will be harvested for the first time this season.

Blackcurrant spring

By Heather Chalmers

Just like the berries it harvests, New Zealand's blackcurrant industry may be small, but it packs a lot of punch for its size.



Budburst on Blackadder, an early variety.

Both globally and domestically blackcurrants is a small industry with only 34 commercial growers in New Zealand producing fruit for processing, a number in decline after two growers exited at the end of last season.

While most people are aware the fruit is high in vitamin C, blackcurrants are also full of powerful antioxidants, called anthocyanins, which gives the berries their distinctive dark purple colour. Clinical trials show that regular consumption of blackcurrants reduces muscle stiffening and muscle fatigue, increases blood flow and improves kidney and eye function. However, it can be difficult to make marketing headway with these health claims over those of other dark-coloured berries, such as blueberries and cranberries. Being 100% processed and predominantly exported, blackcurrants are also prone to the vagaries of the commodities market.

Blackcurrants' requirement for winter chill and a lack of processing facilities in the North Island mean it is a South Island-based industry. Growers are predominantly in Canterbury (76%) and Nelson (23%), with a pocket in Otago (1%). After a run of untimely bad weather including late frosts, hail and high winds reducing yields, the 2012 harvest was the best for several years, producing around 7900 tonnes of fruit, says Blackcurrants New Zealand Inc chairman and Canterbury grower Dr Bill Jermyn. "I'd like to think we're an 8000 to 9000 tonne industry in a normal year, which equates to about 3 per cent of world production."

NZ Blackcurrant Co-operative Ltd manager Mike Kearney says that while supply is currently matching demand the industry is battling "head winds" such as the global financial crisis and high Kiwi dollar. "The outlook for the next five to 10 years is reasonably positive, but I don't see a lot of expansion in terms of volumes. We need to focus on

Industry exports earn \$13 to \$20 million FOB annually, with returns varying in response to international prices for concentrate and climatic events affecting crop yields.

improving the price as it hasn't been that great in the last five to 10 years."

Most blackcurrants are processed into beverage and as around 85% is exported and commodity driven, this is not helped by an unfavourable exchange rate.

Mr Kearney said improved returns will come from new innovative products as well as broadening the number of countries purchasing product. Key export markets for blackcurrants are currently Australia, Malaysia, Japan and the United States.

The Nelson-based co-operative is the second-biggest buyer of blackcurrants, behind GlaxoSmithKline (GSK), makers of Ribena. "Blackcurrants are very perishable, they don't last long off the bush and they have to be harvested within a short time, so a co-operative gives growers security that they have a buyer. Our pricing is also transparent from the market back to the grower. There are no hidden profit margins," said Mr Kearney.

Mr Jermyn said that while at least three-quarters of blackcurrants are processed into concentrate to make

beverages such as Ribena and Barkers, 8% goes into IQF (Individually Quick Frozen) product and another 8% into nutraceutical supplement powder, both relatively new developments. A small number of growers have ventured into growing organic blackcurrants.

Industry exports earn \$13 to \$20 million FOB annually, with returns varying in response to international prices for concentrate and climatic events affecting crop yields.

"Canterbury has the production capacity to expand significantly, but the biggest constraint is the muted demand for fruit beverages."

Blackcurrant growers were unaffected by a 2007 scandal in which ready-to-drink cartons of Ribena were found by two Auckland schoolgirls in a school science experiment to contain almost no trace of vitamin C, at odds with stated levels. "We were very impressed that GSK maintained grower volumes and prices," said Mr Jermyn. GSK has since changed its testing procedures.

"Blackcurrants are a well established small industry, with a small turnover of growers. It was established in the 1970s, so it's a young industry and we are now seeing second-generation growers. As a permanent crop, it is not something you can quickly switch in and out of and irrigation and shelter are critical." The crop is mechanised, which means it is easy to manage, but has high capital costs in machinery. Plantings vary in size, with five growers, mainly based in Canterbury, growing more than 100ha of blackcurrants, while some have only 5ha.

Comprehensive grower data provides a proven traceability system which ensures each batch of fruit can be traced back to its source.

"Weather is unfortunately the major decider of yields. The industry's stated goal is 10 tonne/ha, but the average is around 6/tonne/ha, which is unsatisfactory," said Mr Jermyn. Funding has been received from the Sustainable Farming Fund for a project to identify factors to improve crop production.

A joint breeding programme known as Blackhort funded by Blackcurrants NZ and Plant & Food Research is successfully



developing new varieties with improved pest and disease resistance, yields and berry quality.

Varieties are also being developed with a spread of flowering and harvesting times to mitigate climatic risk. "Blackcurrants are harvested in January, so it is useful to have a spread of harvest maturities so you can schedule harvesting and processing." Breeders are also seeking to improve anthocyanin and vitamin C levels, as well as taste.

Five main varieties are currently used: Magnus, an older variety, Ben Ard and Ben Rua, the two main processing varieties, and two new varieties Murchison and Blackadder, both named after South Island mountains, (not the Crusaders coach and former player Todd Backadder).

"I believe we have a fabulous product and would like more of the world to know that. It's a satisfying crop to grow with its aromatic foliage and fruit," said Mr Jermyn, who grows 24ha of blackcurrants at Ladbrooks, between Christchurch and Lincoln.



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Central Canterbury farmer Murray Stephens, who has been growing blackcurrants since 1980, has 80ha planted in the crop. Despite plantings making up only 28% of the farm's 287ha, it earns 60% of its income. "It is a high value per/ha crop, but you have some years where you don't get the production, because of adverse weather like frost during bud burst and flowering. Yields can swing by 20 per cent from year to year on the same block." He plans to continue gradually expanding blackcurrant plantings towards 90ha. "We've got the machinery for the crop and we want to utilise it." His farm, towards the coast near Lake Ellesmere, is suited to growing blackcurrants.


The farm also grows processed peas, beans and broadbeans for Wattie's in Christchurch, as well as cereal seed multiplication. "When I look around the world, the more successful blackcurrant growers are the ones that have a mixture of crops as they are spreading risk. You've got to be in it for the long haul.

"Blackcurrants are a good, healthy product and it's a matter of promoting this to the public. It's what we can sell overseas though, as the New Zealand market is so small," said Mr Stephens.

Nelson grower and NZ Blackcurrants director Philip Leith grows 40ha of blackcurrants at Upper Moutere along with stock and forestry. "We had apples for many years, but blackcurrants are now our only horticultural crop. I have a lot of faith in the industry. It is a good product."

Compared with pipfruit, blackcurrants were more consistent, lower risk, relatively straightforward to grow, and require less labour and spraying, he said. "Blackcurrants seem well suited to our climate." Blackcurrants were an easier horticultural crop to establish than pipfruit or kiwifruit.



However, the cost of land was becoming a barrier – Nelson does not have much flat land with water available while Canterbury growers have other options such as dairy support and other crops. Farmers also appear to be becoming more risk adverse and less likely to try alternative crops, said Mr Leith. 



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