**A WORLD OF OPPORTUNITY**

This year's record-breaking Global Berry Congress put the focus on health and the future of the industry. The Fruitnet team rounds up the best of the news from the event.

**Record response for Global Berry Congress**

A record 580 people from 50 countries attended this year's Global Berry Congress, making it the world's largest event dedicated to the entire soft-fruit supply chain.

During the three-day event, which took place on 25-27 March at the Beurs-World Trade Center in Rotterdam, visitors were able to learn about the latest new trends in the international berry business and meet with key industry players, as well as visit production, distribution and R&D sites as part of a study tour programme.

The Global Berry Congress also featured 37 exhibitors, all of which were able to promote their products or services to visitors within a sizeable networking area alongside the various stages.

A packed programme featuring 50 speakers across six different stages offered extensive coverage of key topics shaping the soft-fruit sector, including efforts to cut plastic packaging, moves to satisfy rising consumer demand for healthier and more convenient products, the introduction and impact of new technologies like automated harvesting and LED lighting, and the need to make berry production more environmentally sustainable.

Delegates could choose to listen to a range of talks, presentations and interviews, including contributions...
from Tesco’s technical manager for soft fruit Sabina Wyant; the head of UC Davis’ strawberry breeding programme Steve Knapp; television star, author and nutrition expert Dale Pinnock, also known as ‘The Medicinal Chef;’ and Veronique Parmentier, global marketing manager at kiwi-fruit company Zespri.

Health was at the heart of this year’s programme. Pinnock’s talk about the nutritional properties of berries was followed by a thought-provoking discussion about how the fruits’ complicated but scientifically significant attributes might be more effectively communicated to consumers for maximum effect, without falling foul of strict rules that govern what is and isn’t permitted when it comes to making health and nutritional claims about products.

“We need to work out how to take some of that key information and market it in the right way to the right level of consumer – whether that’s children or adults,” argued Rachel Montague-Ebbis, head of brand and communications at Soloberry. “We’ve always had lovely glossy pictures of fruit being hand picked in the fields, but there’s nothing really about inspiring people to consume berries at different mealtimes – they’re not just for breakfast and snacking.”

Addressing growing concerns among consumers about the use of plastic packaging in fresh produce, Wyant said Tesco was doing all it could to reduce its environmental footprint.

“We’ve adopted a flexible and pragmatic approach as to whether we can remove packaging for certain products,” she explained. “Our research shows that consumers will link compostable packaging to the grower and therefore will think about organic product and how you can produce something in a natural environment and reduce plastic.”

She added: “Within that we feel there is great potential for organic berries and other organic produce, but also we need to be realistic that berries need to be transported on a global level from lots of different sources around the world to supply our shelves and within that there needs to be a period of trials and adjustment as to how it can work on a global level.

“Step one is how can you be recyclable, step two is how can you remove all the bad plastics, and then how can you eliminate plastics.”

The event also heard about the potential for new commercial channels to provide a way of boosting demand for fresh berries.

Commenting on the event itself, Fruitnet’s editorial director for Europe Mike Knowles said: “This latest Global Berry Congress represented a really great moment for the international soft-fruit business. The fact that so many people from all over the world came together to find ways of improving what is an already highly successful category, I think that’s a hugely positive sign.”

Emphasising the multiple health benefits of berries presents a major untapped opportunity to boost sales in the soft-fruit sector, nutritionist and chef Dale Pinnock has insisted.

As demand increases for high-quality information on how diet and lifestyle can influence our health, soft-fruit supplier Soloberry has joined forces with the self-styled “Medicinal Chef” to develop eight exclusive berry recipes for the company.

In addition, he is trying to spread awareness of the many ways that berries can improve our health, with a focus on how, in practice, they benefit you.

Last week he presented some of these advantages to the soft-fruit industry at the Global Berry Congress in Rotter
Rotterdam, following recent research from the University of Reading and King’s College London.

Three major advantages highlighted by Pinnock at the conference were that they help to bring down blood pressure; they protect against thrombosis by guarding against endothelial damage; and they strengthen our gut flora, helping to protect us from pathogens and infection.

“When people have spoken about the health benefits of berries in the past, it’s always been the same word thrown around: antioxidants,” he said. “True, there are loads of antioxidants in there; but this is probably the least exciting thing that’s going on.

“In the UK in particular, we’ve been doing a lot of research on a specific class of compounds found in berries: polyphenols. They’re a very diverse group of phytochemicals that are found in a wide array of different foods.”

One type of polyphenol in particular, anthocyanins, has major benefits for the cardiovascular system, which is especially important given that heart disease is the single biggest killer in the western world.

Anthocyanins are part of the chemistry that gives berries their deep colour pigments, so the darker the berries, the higher the concentration of these beneficial compounds.

By triggering endothelial cells (on the interior surface of blood vessels) to secrete nitric oxide, anthocyanins cause the walls of blood vessels to relax and dilate, thus lowering blood pressure.

This nitric oxide also plays a second role, helping to protect against damage to the endothelium, which can lead to the clogging of a vessel or thrombosis.

In addition, research at King’s College London has shown that polyphenols can strengthen our gut flora, which provides a physical barrier, helping to stop opportunistic pathogens from making their way into the body and causing infection.

“This isn’t going to replace medication any time soon – that’s not the point,” said Pinnock. “The point is that when you understand how day-to-day foods can influence your health you can start to do something for yourself. You can engage in your own healthcare.”

Commenting on the best way to convey these potentially complicated health messages to consumers, he added: “It’s about doing it in soundbites that are actually applicable. You can really go down the rabbit hole and reach some extreme levels of detail if you want, which isn’t necessary for the consumer at all.

“It’s about finding soundbites that resonate with people’s desires, and we’re at a time now where people are crying out for information, particularly with things like degenerative health conditions that are plaguing our healthcare systems.”

Solberry’s head of brand and communications Rachel Montague-Ebbs acknowledged that it can be “very tricky” to make health claims on food packaging but she said it’s all about research. “The British Summer Fruits team works with the University of Reading quite a lot and we’re trying to really dig into the key nutritional elements,” she said.

“Then it’s about trying to turn that into the right story for the consumer.”

Capturing new consumers is key to berries’ growth

There is tremendous potential to increase berry consumption by introducing the fruit into new distribution channels, says Berry Gardens’ head of new business development Amy Lance.

Speaking during a session on new commercial channels for berries at last week’s Global Berry Congress, Lance said vendor machines, gym and pop-up healthy food outlets were just some of the routes to market that were not yet being fully exploited.

Citing the success of meal box schemes in the US and UK, Lance suggested the inclusion of a breakfast or dessert option incorporating berries was a further example of new avenues that could be explored.
"There are diverse models where distribution is not consolidated – this is at once challenging and a great opportunity," she said.

"One of the biggest issues that we face is how to maintain good shelf life and stock rotation. Solving this is by no means simple but it can be done."

Lance said bringing the price point down was also important in order to ensure that the whole population has access to berries.

Hans Liekens, commercial director EMEA for Fall Creek Farm & Nursery, noted that generating more tasting opportunities would help capture new consumers. One way of doing this was by targeting a captive audience, for example by including berries in aeroplane desserts and hotel breakfast buffets.

Liekens also shared the breeder’s strategy to help growers become more consumer-focused rather than supply-led. The company organises regular field trips and tasting days bringing growers and retailers together to gain a better understanding of each other’s needs, and to share key market information and insights.

**Next steps in berry tech**

The Global Berry Congress included a series of talks on the Launchpad stage covering some of the most up-to-date technology and innovative industry practices.

Sessions throughout the day covered a wide and varying range of topics, from controlled atmosphere packaging and financial planning to protecting berry production and automated harvesting.

The opening session, a panel discussion involving Tom Goen of Octinion, Marko Kakanovic of BSK and Willem van Eldik of Delphy, took a general look at the future of technology within the berry industry, and saw chair Michael Barker ask the question of what the most exciting areas of development in the industry would be in the coming years.

"Everything is exciting in berries!" said van Eldik. "But the key issues moving forward will surround things like 24/7 supply, artificial lighting such as LED, and labour issues that could be solved by robotics."

Goen agreed that 24/7 production of berries was high on the agenda, as was robotics. "On a sector-wide scale, robotics will take time to be implemented," he noted. "We are looking at at least five to ten years before things are mainly automated."

van Eldik added that the industry would never be 100 percent fully automated. "On that issue of labour being replaced, it will never happen completely," he told delegates. "You will always need people - for example, specialists with expertise in production."

"I agree, you will always need specialists with expertise, no matter how much you automate - whether these are managers, machinery operators, technical staff or [those] involved with growing," said Kakanovic. "Another area of innovation that I expect to see grow in the future is that of mechanical harvesting for blueberries and haskap berries, with equipment that can gather up to 95-97 percent of the harvest."