

Namibia harvests first commercial blueberries thanks to smart irrigation

July 2020 saw the commencement of Namibia's first-ever commercial harvest of blueberries by local company Mashare Berries Farming (Pty) Ltd. The historic harvest took place on a 20ha development located close to the Okavango River between Mashare and Mupapama villages in Kavango East, northern Namibia.



Blueberries reach maturity and ripen at different stages on the same bush. This allows for a longer harvesting season usually lasting three to four months.

The fruit is being sold and marketed under the trading name Namib Blue and is earmarked for Namibian as well as international consumption. Exports commence in August to markets across Europe and Asia and Indian Ocean islands, including Mauritius, the Maldives, and Seychelles.

Exceptional quality fruit

According to Willem Mostert, Namibian manager of Cherry Irrigation, whose team designed and implemented the fully automated drip irrigation and fertigation management system for the landmark project the quality of the fruit harvested has so far been exceptional.

"A few years ago, no one would have dreamed that you could grow high-quality blueberries in a country as dry as this, says the Namibian-born Mostert. "We're proving what's possible with the right planning, infrastructure and management in place."



Shade nets protect Mashare's blueberry bushes from the harsh sun in Kavango East, Northern Namibia. These images were taken in January 2020, two months after they were planted. Harvesting of the JupiterBlue® blueberries began in early July and is set to continue into October as different varieties ripen.

Mashare project director Albert Basson says the 2020 harvest is set to continue into late October. "We're projecting a yield of up to 150 tonnes, as different varieties reach maturity. Currently, three varieties imported from the US-based grower Fall Creek have been planted on the property: AtlasBlue, JupiterBlue® and BiancaBlue®. The plantings were established in November 2019, with 16ha under net, 2ha in tunnels and 2ha in open field."

Mashare Berries plans to double its production area by the end of 2021, with Cherry Irrigation on board for the expansion. "Ultimately, within the next five years we would like to expand blueberry cultivation across 200ha to 300ha of land in the region," Basson adds.

Success with custom irrigation

Cherry Irrigation's executive director, Charles Cherry, believes the success of the pilot project attests to the enormous untapped potential of arid or semi-arid regions. "These areas can effectively produce a range of crop types through careful water and resource management.

"We're seeing first-hand from this development and others we're involved with across Namibia that customised irrigation design is the way forward. Simply put, it ensures both environmental sustainability and commercial profitability over the long term," he adds.

"The outlay of quality equipment, custom designs, smart technologies and artificial intelligence (AI) monitoring solutions may cost more initially. But for crops like blueberries that are highly sensitive to climatic conditions and soil and water quality, we believe this approach is crucial to success," Cherry explains. "If you do it right, look at what you can achieve."

Basson agrees: "We partnered with Cherry Irrigation after seeing their success with custom system design for blueberry plantations in South Africa. Like us, they recognise the enormous agri-potential of Namibia that we are working to unlock."

Namibia wants to produce locally

Mashare Berries is a subsidiary of Mashare Irrigation, which produces a variety of grains and vegetables, including wheat, maize, sorghum, potatoes, onions and cauliflowers in Kavango East, for the local Namibian market.



Because blueberries must be hand-harvested to ensure that fruit is not damaged or bruised, the industry offers excellent employment opportunities for seasonal workers. During peak harvest times, a larger staff contingent is required for this highly labour-intensive work. Pictured here are Mitrud Shirongo (left) and Ester Marungu (right) from Mashare village.

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"With the right teams, investors and companies on board, Namibia has the potential to be a world-class production hub for fresh goods," says Cherry. "There is a big national drive to develop local resources properly and to produce more local fruit, vegetables, livestock fodder and other horticultural products, thereby reducing the need to import.

"Cherry Irrigation's mandate is to properly support farmers in their quest to increase employment opportunities and improve food security in the country. We are proud to be part of this evolution. We're bringing our knowledge and experience to the table to add value for the long haul. Blueberries are just the beginning."

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